

Puerto Rican migration to mainland nears milestone



RICARDO FIGUEROA • KRT CAMPUS

Daly Morales, 21, is a student at the University of Puerto Rico's Bayamon Campus in Bayamon, Puerto Rico. Shown on Jan. 22, 2004, Morales and her family will join a growing number of people leaving the Caribbean island for a life on the U.S. mainland.

By Ray Quintanilla
KRT CAMPUS

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico—Daly Morales' goal for 2004 is written on her calendar: "Pack up the husband and baby" and leave the island where she was born for either Central Florida or New York.

"I have to go where the money is," she said.

Puerto Rico businesses don't offer the kind of money Morales can earn in places such as Orlando, Fla., or New York City, explained the University of Puerto Rico senior, who will graduate with a degree in electronics.

Morales and her family will join a growing number of people leaving this Caribbean island, headed for a new life somewhere on the U.S. mainland.

As early as this summer, that exodus will hit a milestone—the number of Puerto Ricans living on the mainland will surpass the number living in Puerto Rico.

It's a historic turning point. The growth in Puerto Ricans living in places like Central Florida and in pockets throughout the states is expected to foster debate on issues such as whether those on the mainland should have a formal voice in governing the island.

And as natives of the island move to the mainland, they are frequently being replaced by immigrants from throughout the region. During the 1990s, Puerto Rico became a Caribbean melting pot.

More than 140,000 people living in Puerto Rico identify themselves as coming from somewhere else in Latin America, mostly from the Dominican Republic, but also from Cuba, Mexico, Colombia and other places—a watershed for the island.

"Change is raising new and complicated issues for the island," said Jorge Duany, a University of Puerto Rico anthropologist and a leading researcher on the island. "It will be interesting to see whether this closing of the gap brings both sides together or creates divide."

The 2000 census set the island's population at 3.6 million, only about 200,000 more than the number of Puerto Ricans counted in the 50 states. Today, that gap has closed to within a few thousand, and within months mainland Puerto Ricans will exceed those on the island.

In the past 10 years, the equivalent of 8 percent of the island's population has moved to the mainland, mostly for economic reasons.

Because they are U.S. citizens, Puerto Ricans face no immigration issues. And that has opened the door for natives of the island seeking a better life.

Many of those making the move are professionals—physicians, teachers, nurses and engineers. In the 1990s, almost 40 percent of all doctors who graduated from medical schools here moved to the mainland, Duany said. And there have been vigorous recruiting efforts to lure teachers and nurses to fill shortages stateside.

Migration out of Puerto Rico has been going on for decades. During the mid-20th century, Duany says, the island's economic development strategy "expelled" a large number of islanders to cities throughout the United States. Many settled into the Northeast, lured by its big cities with already-large migrant populations and plentiful manufacturing jobs.

One of the plan's architects, former Gov. Luis Munoz Marin, presided over the exodus of a half-million Puerto Ricans to the

mainland. By the 1970s, though, the trend had hit an equilibrium, with as many returning to the island as were leaving.

The latest wave of migration has been drawing away professionals as well as laborers, economists say.

In a report to the Puerto Rican Chamber of Commerce this week, Jose Joaquin Villamil, the organization's past president, said the island's economy doesn't produce enough high-paying jobs to retain professionals graduating from the commonwealth's universities.

In this low-wage economy, 70 percent of Puerto Ricans earn less than \$25,000 annually.

"The jobs for them are not on the island," said Villamil, president of Estudios Tecnicos, a consulting firm. The migration can cause shortages. For instance, though the island needs more nurses, about 1,100 departed for the mainland.

Felix V. Matos-Rodriguez, director of Centro de Estudios Puertorriquenos at Hunter College of the City University of New York, said the so-called "brain drain" has made it difficult to retain the island's best and brightest.

Still, he said, "you hear stories all the time about people who come back to the island."

As the Puerto Rican population in the states surpasses that on the island, Matos-Rodriguez said all people of Puerto Rican descent should mark the milestone with "quiet reflection."

"It's a time to look at ways for those on the mainland and the island to consider ways to bridge differences," Matos-Rodriguez said.

With so many Puerto Ricans living on the mainland, yet maintaining ties to the island, some say they should be allowed to vote in referendums, plebiscites and elections in the commonwealth.

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