

The Culture of Poverty in Puerto Rico and New York*

"ON THE WHOLE, there was little important change in the customs and culture of the sample families that migrated from Puerto Rico to New York," states Oscar Lewis in the final report on a study of urban slum life in San Juan and the problems of adjustment and changes in the family life of Puerto Rican migrants to New York. In the course of the study, the project group was also seeking to devise new field methods and new ways to organize and present family data. Mr. Lewis was director of the study, which represents a step in the long-range work of testing and refining the concept of a cross-societal subculture of poverty.

As subjects for the research in Puerto Rico, 100 families living in four slum areas in Greater San Juan were selected. All were low-income families who had relatives living in New York City. The New York sample comprised 50 families living in Puerto Rican neighborhoods in three boroughs of New York City. All were first-generation migrants who had been raised with those in the San Juan sample or had lived in the same areas under similar circumstances. Nearly half were related by sibling ties to the families in the San Juan sample and an additional fifth were children of these families.

Data were gathered in San Juan in 1963-64 and subsequently in New York in 1964-65. Four basic schedules were applied to each sample family. The schedules dealt with household composition, an inventory of major household items, a summary of residence and employment history of each adult, and information concerning migration to New York. In groups of families subsampled for intensive analysis, additional interviews were conducted with each family mem-

ber to record his life story and question him on a wide range of topics.

The report is based primarily on the census-type data from the basic schedules. A few case histories and excerpts from the detailed interviews of individual family members accompany the discussion by way of illustration. Forty tables in the report give comparable data on household composition, income and occupation, education, marital status, housing and length of residence, ownership of household goods and clothing, household expenditures, families on relief, and amount of travel between San Juan and New York. Part 1 of the report deals with the San Juan families. Part 2, in parallel, discusses the New York families and concludes with a comparison of findings in Puerto Rico and New York.

The report also presents statistical data from a special survey of families in one of the four San Juan slums, much older for the most part than the other slums, with a higher incidence of deteriorated and dilapidated houses and lower education and income levels. (The members of several households in this subsample, together with their relatives in New York, were the subjects of detailed, in-depth study out of which came the book *La Vida*.¹)

The following summary of data from the report gives parallel information about the two samples—age and size of household, marital status and family composition, migration patterns, employment and income, education, and material possessions; a description of the adjustment of Puerto Ricans to living in New York City; and comments on the culture of poverty in the slums of San Juan and the Puerto Rican neighborhoods in New York City.

THE SAMPLE POPULATIONS

Age and Size of Household

Youth predominated in both samples, with few persons aged 65 or over and more than half under

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¹ Oscar Lewis, *La Vida*, Random House, 1966.

age 20. The following figures summarize the percentage distribution of the total populations of the San Juan and New York samples, by age group:

Age	San Juan	New York
Number in sample.....	1 594	198
Percent:		
0-19.....	65	51
20-64.....	32	47
65 and over.....	3	2

¹ Excludes 11 whose age was not reported.

San Juan.—The 100-family sample comprised 605 persons—slightly more than 6 persons in a household, ranging from households with 1 person each to 27 households with 8 or more members each.

New York.—There were 198 persons in the 50-family sample—an average of slightly less than four persons in a household, ranging from eight households with one person each to 14 households with six to eight members. The young population was concentrated in relatively few households; 40 percent of the families had three or more children.

Marital Status and Family Composition

The predominant type of household in both samples was nuclear (husband, wife, and their children; or husband, wife, and children of one or both by previous marriages). In both groups, also, there were extended families (households including relatives other than parents and children) and tendencies toward matrifocality (mother alone with children or wife's mother and/or other relatives of wife in the household).

The following figures compare the families in San Juan and New York by marital status of the head of the household:

Marital status	San Juan	New York
Number in sample.....	100	50
Percent:		
Legally married.....	48	44
Free union.....	26	22
Divorced, separated abandoned.....	14	26
Widowed.....	10	2
Single.....	2	6

San Juan.—Fifty-seven families were nuclear; of these, 19 included children by former marriages. Approximately a third of the families in the sample were matrifocal. Twenty-four families were extended, more often including the wife's relatives than the husband's. There were seven mother-child families.

New York.—Eighteen families were nuclear; two of these included husband, wife, and wife's children. Twenty percent of the families were extended. In New York more often than in San Juan, they were extended by relatives who were able to contribute to family income. More than a fourth of the households were matrifocal; of these, eight (16 percent of the sample) were mother-child families.

Migration Patterns and Length of Residence

Eighty-three percent of the San Juan adults had migrated from rural areas. These families had lived in slums an average of 20 years, 13.6 years in the slum in which they were living in 1964 at the time of the survey.

Eighty-two percent of the families in New York had migrated from a Puerto Rican slum, usually in the Greater San Juan area. Twelve percent migrated to New York from rural areas in Puerto Rico; 6 percent from urban nonslum areas. Two-thirds of the family heads had migrated from rural areas in Puerto Rico to San Juan and then to New York. Household heads averaged 11.3 years of residence in New York, with a range of 8 months to 43 years. Twenty-five families lived in the borough of Manhattan, 14 in the Bronx, 11 in Brooklyn.

Low incomes and unemployment in Puerto Rico and the hope of economic advantage in New York were the underlying reasons for most of the migrations to New York, although many of the moves were spur-of-the-moment flights from personal problems such as family fights or trouble with the police.

Housing

The extent of homeownership varied among the slums in San Juan. Twenty-eight percent of the

families in the poorest slum owned their homes; in another slum area 65 percent were homeowners. About 75 percent of all the housing was unsound.

All the New York families lived in apartment buildings, and 46 of them rented unfurnished apartments. Rentals ranged from \$31 to \$108.97; and the median rental was \$62.50.

Employment and Income

San Juan.—In the 100-family sample, 79 men and 35 women were employed. About 4 in 10 of the men and 1 in 6 of the women had jobs that required any skill or training.

The mean annual family income was \$1,703. Two-fifths of the families received less than \$1,000; one-fifth, less than \$500. Monthly per capita income was \$23.34.

New York.—In the 50-family sample, 67 persons were employed and 60 of the 67 were in jobs requiring little skill or education. Two-thirds of the employed adults (25 of the 43 men, 20 of the 24 women) were operatives. Almost all of these were factory workers, a new experience for most of them. Jobs lasted an average of 3 years, and the employed adults had held an average of 3.2 jobs in New York City.

Weekly wages ranged from \$30 for a housemaid to \$170 for the only employed adult who was classified as a professional—an auto mechanics teacher. Income of the migrants had increased by about 29 percent in the 9-year period preceding the study, but the increases were the result of general wage increases in the area rather than any singular economic advance of this group.

Median annual family income was \$3,678. Monthly per capita income was a little over \$100. The higher family incomes reflected not only higher wages and steady employment but also the presence of multiple wage earners. The seven families with the highest annual income (\$7,500 or more) had a total of 20 full-time wage earners and one part-time worker.

Employment patterns.—Many more wives worked outside the home in New York City than in San Juan: 41 percent compared with 16 percent.

The rate of union membership was higher in New York City. Sixty percent of the working adults belonged to unions in New York City and 20 percent in San Juan.

The unemployment rate for the 102 men in the labor force in the San Juan sample was 22.5 percent. In New York City, the sample families had an unemployment rate of 9.1 percent for males aged 14 and over in the labor force.

Families on Welfare Rolls

Twenty percent of the San Juan families received welfare payments; payments rarely exceeded \$35 to \$40 per month.

Twenty percent of the New York families were on welfare. Payments averaged \$153.50 per month. Half these families had been on welfare for 3 years or less; half had been on welfare for 10 years or more. Of the 10 families on welfare in New York, only three had also been on welfare in Puerto Rico.

Education

The educational level was low in both samples and lower in San Juan than in New York. Children dropped out of school sooner in San Juan than in New York, but dropouts were a problem in both groups. In San Juan the average grade level of dropouts was 5.9 years; in New York, it was 9.5 years. Lack of incentive was considered a major factor in both groups. Among the girls, early marriage was an additional cause. Boys in New York sought to work, but there was little opportunity for teenagers to work in San Juan. The following figures compare the educational levels of the adults:

Years of school completed	San Juan	New York
Percent:		
Less than 1.....	25	12
1-6.....	54	41
7-9.....	19	20
10-12.....	2	26
Over 12.....	0	1

Adults over age 18 in San Juan averaged 3.6 years of schooling. Eighty-four percent of the

school-age (7-19) children living at home were in school, most of them in primary grades.

Ninety percent of the adults over age 18 in New York had not completed high school. They had 6.5 years of schooling, on the average.

Relationships

San Juan.—The following figures summarize data on education, marital status, and length of residence in correlation with income in the San Juan families:

Per capita monthly income	Number of families	Mean years of schooling (family head)	Marital status (percent)			Average years in slums (all families)
			Legally married	Living in free union	Divorced, separated, abandoned	
Less than \$10.....	22	3.3	22.7	27.3	27.3	16.6
\$10-\$19.99.....	28	2.5	35.7	32.1	17.9	15.4
\$20-\$39.99.....	28	4.9	60.7	25.0	7.1	16.5
\$40 or more.....	22	4.4	72.7	18.1	4.5	15.9

In the 50 families with less than \$20 per capita monthly income the family heads had an average of 2.8 years of schooling; in the other 50 families, they had 4.4 years.

There was a greater incidence of broken homes among lower-income families and a greater incidence of legal marriages than of free unions among families with higher incomes.

There was no correlation between income and the number of years families had lived in slums.

New York.—The correlation between income and education was even more marked in New York than in San Juan. In families above the median income level, the average schooling was 7.6 years; in families below the median the average was 4.6 years.

The severely limited earning capacity of the unskilled laborer was reflected in the lack of correlation between income and the length of time that families had lived in New York City. The highest-income families averaged 10.6 years of residence; the lowest-income families, 11 years.

For the New York families, as for the San Juan families, broken homes were associated with low incomes but there was little relationship between the type of marriage (whether legal or free

union) and income. In above-median-income families there were more legal marriages, but there were also more free unions than in below-median-income families. The marital status of the wage earners in families above and below the median family income level was as follows:

Characteristic	Family income level	
	Above median	Below median
Employed, number.....	42	25
Marital status, percent:		
Divorced, separated, abandoned.....	7	40
Legal marriage.....	43	36
Free union.....	21	8

The families of the New York sample were among the poorest in New York City, ranking below the Puerto Rican population as a whole in the city, which in turn had less income than nonwhites and white non-Puerto Ricans in New York City. The families in the sample also had poorer jobs, less education, a smaller proportion of men and women of working age, and poorer housing than these other groups.

MATERIAL INVENTORIES AND EXPENDITURES

The study of material possessions of urban dwellers on a household basis formed an important part of this research into the culture of poverty. Among the aims of such study is an assessment of a people's values as reflected in the relative amounts of income spent on various types of objects. Changes in the type of expenditures and in shopping patterns in New York were looked to with special interest as an index of acculturation.

The inventories included for every item found in a household: the quantity, description, and condition; length of time in possession; the cost, whether purchased by installment or cash, whether new or used when purchased, and who made the purchase; if the item was a gift, when given, by whom, for what occasion, whether new or used, and approximate value; if homemade, by whom, when, and the value; the cost of replacement for any item and whether it had been pawned and/or redeemed.

Household Goods

The purchase of new rather than secondhand goods and installment buying were markedly characteristic of both the San Juan and New York families. From two-thirds to three-fourths of the purchases of household goods in both samples had been made within the 5 years preceding the study, and more than a fourth of the purchases had been made within the year preceding the study.

San Juan.—Possessions classified as luxuries in the San Juan sample and the proportion of families who had them were: radios, 74 percent; refrigerators, 66 percent; living-room sets, 60 percent; television sets, 48 percent; wristwatches, 44 percent; dining-room sets, 24 percent; phonographs, 23 percent; sewing machines, 23 percent; gas stoves, 18 percent; washing machines, 13 percent; cars, 12 percent; and electric stoves, 2 percent.

The families had spent an average of \$1,379 for household and related goods. Indebtedness for installment purchases averaged \$110.

New York.—Although the New York families had three to four times as much income and many more of the luxury items, except for cars, they did not spend proportionately more on household goods. The mean investment in household goods in the New York sample was \$1,664, and average indebtedness was \$139.35 per family. The low differential was attributed to lower prices for furniture and appliances in New York and the frequent provision of two major items, stove and refrigerator, by the landlord. In addition, because they hoped to return to Puerto Rico, many families invested less in furnishings than if they had committed themselves to staying in New York.

Clothing

Clothing was a major expenditure in both San Juan and New York, and in some families represented an outlay that seemed grossly out of proportion to total expenditures.

San Juan.—In a complete clothing (and jewelry) inventory of every third family in the

San Juan sample, clothing was found to account for more than half of all major household purchases or, in other words, was worth more than all their other goods combined, excluding the cost of the house. The mean outlay for the clothing on hand was \$657 per family.

New York.—The higher income of New York families was reflected in the much higher investment in clothing, a mean outlay of \$1,560 per family for the clothing on hand. An inventory of clothing and jewelry in a selected group of families indicated that a third more was spent on clothing than on all other household possessions. Over 90 percent of the purchases had been made in two shopping areas in the neighborhoods where the families lived.

Food

With a generally higher standard of living, New York families spent twice as much for food as the San Juan families, but food represented only one-third of their total expenditures compared with one-half the total for San Juan families. New York families spent proportionately less on food than the San Juan families, but they spent proportionately more on rent, transportation, and personal services and gifts.

THE CULTURE OF POVERTY

The study proposes, as a hypothesis to be tested by further research, the notion of a subculture of poverty that transcends regional, rural-urban, and national differences with similarities in family structure, interpersonal relations, time orientation, value systems, and spending patterns. It differentiates between physical poverty per se and the culture of poverty and emphasizes that the latter is much more difficult to eliminate:

Once it comes into existence, it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on the children. By the time slum children are age 6 or 7 they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime.

Conclusions as to the presence or absence of the traits of the culture of poverty in the San Juan and New York families await the analysis of the intensive family case studies. Since this report is based largely on the questionnaire data, the following comparisons are tentative:

Certain traits of the culture of poverty, particularly those related to marriage and family life, such as the presence of free unions, unstable marriages, infidelity, multiple marriages, early marriages, illegitimacy, and matrifocality, were equally present in New York and in Puerto Rico. The higher incidence of broken marriages in New York may not be too significant because of the factor of selectivity. Many of the families had left Puerto Rico primarily because their marriages were shaky or had already dissolved. Other traits such as wife-beating, the use of physical punishment in the training of children, abandonment and neglect of children, were subject to the stricter laws of New York, which had some deterrent effect.

Although our New York sample families had improved their standard of living, worked at higher status jobs, joined more voluntary organizations, used banks, airports and airplanes, belonged to unions, received hospital, medical and unemployment insurance, compensation, more adequate welfare, and were more subject to the mass media, their sense of marginality to the larger society was, if anything, greater than in Puerto Rico. Because the mainland society was predominately middle-class . . . low-income Puerto Rican migrants felt more than ever like second-class citizens. To a large extent they were . . . subjected to discrimination and segregation in housing, schools, jobs, churches, entertainment, and social life. This increased their sense of inferiority and, to some extent, their hostility toward those in authority. The total effect was to make them withdraw from the larger society and to activate their sense of nationality and ethnic identity. They clung to their native language and customs and to their dream of returning to Puerto Rico.

ADJUSTMENT TO LIVING IN NEW YORK

The New York families lived and did most of their shopping in Puerto Rican neighborhoods where the Spanish language was spoken and Puerto Rican customs were observed. Spanish was the standard speech in all but two homes in

New York. About half the adults—more men than women—could communicate readily in English, and nearly three-fourths of the children spoke English. The majority of parents complained of the almost exclusive use of English in the schools and worried that their children were not learning Spanish adequately.

Most people disliked living in apartments, which contrasted with the open-door, open-window dwellings of Puerto Rico. On the other hand, some felt the advantage of less gossip and interference from relatives and neighbors.

The most frequent complaints concerned the crime rate in New York, the climate, high rents, and poor housing. Men complained of the increased freedom of women and chafed at the restrictions against wife-beating in New York. Many parents, accustomed to physical violence in Puerto Rico, felt hampered in disciplining their children because of the legal protection of children from beating.

The migrants expressed disappointment over the loosening of family ties in New York and the weakening of the obligations of *compadrazgo*, undertaken by friends as godparents at the baptism of children. Ninety percent of the San Juan families were Roman Catholics and there was little change in New York, although church attendance declined. The practice of spiritualism and the use of herbs, widespread in Puerto Rico, also declined in New York.

Thirteen of the 50 families definitely planned to stay in New York. More than half the families hoped to return to Puerto Rico, but it was considered unlikely that they would find it possible before they retired, if then.

So many of the families harboured the hope of returning to Puerto Rico that it suggests that Puerto Ricans were, psychologically speaking, not really migrants at all, but rather migrant workers. . . . Many retained a negative attitude toward the city, its people, and its customs even after long years of residence. . . . For most of them, the process of adjustment and assimilation was slow and painful.