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The American Society of Hispanic Economists (ASHE)—a member of the Allied Social Science Association—is a professional association of economists and other social scientists who are concerned with the under-representation of Hispanic Americans in the economics profession and with the lack of research generated on Hispanic American economic and policy issues. Our primary goals include:

1. Promoting the vitality of Hispanics in the economics profession through education, service, and excellence;
2. Promoting rigorous research on economic and policy issues affecting U.S. Hispanic communities and the nation as a whole; and
3. Engaging more Hispanic Americans to effectively participate in the economics profession.

The views expressed in this volume do not necessarily represent the views of the American Society of Hispanic Economists. For more information about ASHE, please contact [asheconomists@yahoo.com](mailto:asheconomists@yahoo.com) or visit our website at [www.asheweb.org](http://www.asheweb.org).

## Letter from the ASHE President

January 1, 2024

It is with tremendous enthusiasm that I begin this year as President of the American Society of Hispanic Economists. I feel very privileged to have the opportunity to serve this esteemed organization which has played a key role in the lives of so many economists for more than 20 years. I am grateful for the investments made by the ASHE founders and long-time stewards, as well as its more recent leaders. This includes my immediate predecessor, Dr. Alfonso Flores-Lagunes, and Past President Dr. Sandra Orozco-Aleman, who have done great service to the organization by strengthening its long-term financial position and raising its organizational profile.

Today, ASHE has expanded its activities substantially to include: organizing sessions and activities at national conferences; posting and disseminating employment information to aid its institutional members in recruitment efforts and its individual members in job searches; expanding the visibility of Hispanic economic issues through the publication of the Hispanic Economic Outlook, press communications, and the ASHE seminar series; celebrating the achievements of our members through the annual ASHE awards and Hispanic Heritage month; and expanding mentorship and professional development opportunities for our members.

I plan to continue these organizational efforts, and work on streamlining ASHE activities through the transition to a web-based membership management platform which was initiated by prior leaders. This will enable us to solidify and increase our membership base through concerted membership drives and partnerships with organizations which will raise the profile of ASHE and expand our circle of members.

The strength and vitality of ASHE depends on all of us, and I invite you to be part of this exciting period of dynamic and strategic growth in our organization. Please reach out to me personally at the email address below if you would like to be a part of any of these initiatives. I thank you for your continued support and hope to serve you well as ASHE President.

Best wishes for a productive year ahead,  
Francisca

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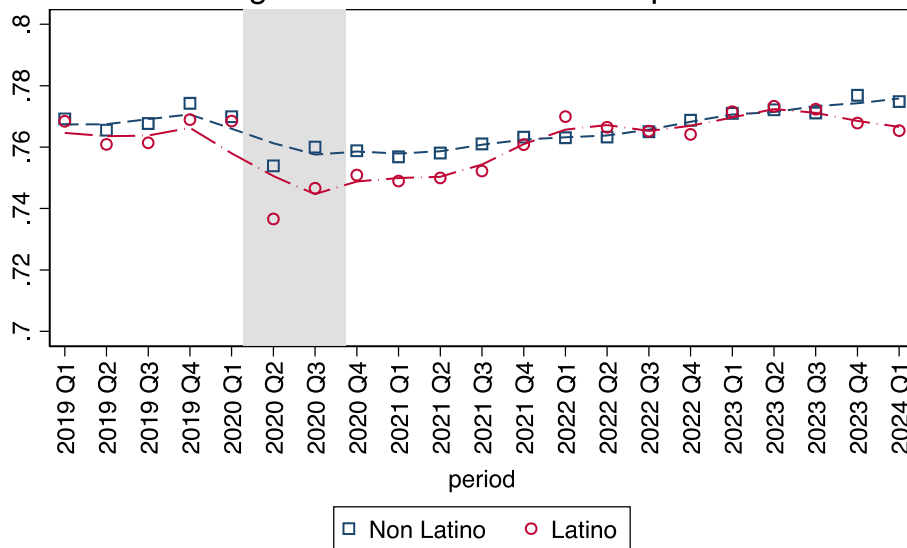
## Status of Latinos in the Labor Market

By Fernando Lozano<sup>1</sup>

The pandemic transformed our work lives in different ways. For example, work-from-home and flexible schedules have become more prominent, and many Americans are refocusing their values towards nonpecuniary activities and leisure (Sharpe and Spencer, 2022). The pandemic was particularly transformative among Latinos who were at the forefront of the “essential” occupations working as first responders, and in sectors such as health, education, and trade (Grooms *et al*, 2021). As we approach five years since the Covid-19 health emergency and its accompanying recession, it is important to understand how Latinos are faring in the labor force. In this piece, I will analyze the evolution of work by Latinos since the pandemic on three dimensions of the labor force: weekly earnings, labor force participation, and employment-to-population ratio.

My interest is to understand how earnings, labor force participation and employment correlate with workers’ demographic characteristics and whether there have been any changes on the industrial sectors where Latinos work. While the aggregated data shows that Latinos in these three labor market dimensions have recovered to the pre-pandemic level, a more careful look of the data shows that there are differences pre and post pandemic across different demographic groups.

Figure 1. Labor Force Participation



Data: Authors calculations using the 2019-2024 Monthly CPS.  
Sample: all men and women currently employed and aged 25-65.

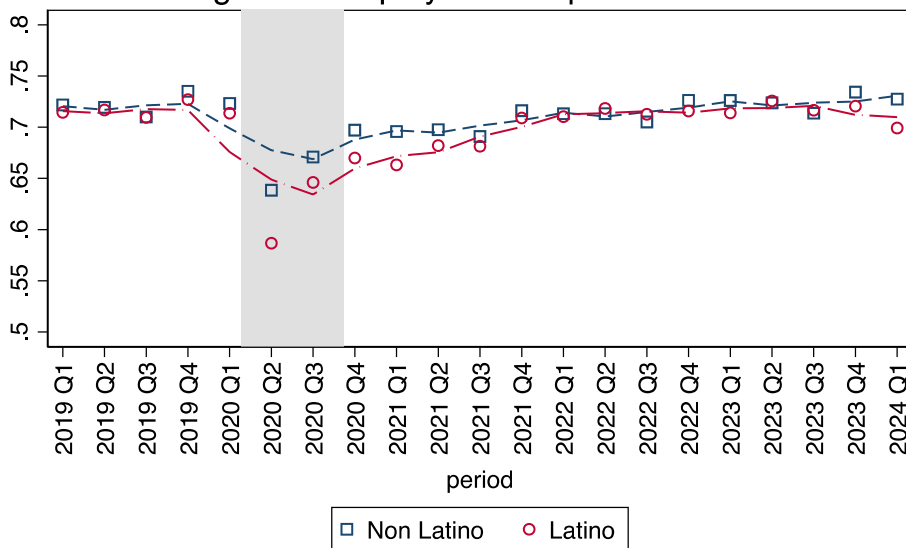
To explore the outcomes of Latinos in the labor force I will use data from the Current Population Survey (CPS). In its monthly survey, the CPS asks every household respondent whether any

<sup>1</sup> Morris B and Gladys S Pendleton Professor of Economics, Department of Economics, Pomona College. (e-mail: fl004747@pomona.edu)

member of the household who is aged 16 year or older is currently working or looking for work. To a subsample of each monthly survey, those in the fourth and eight rotations, the CPS asks additional questions about each person’s labor market outcomes, including their weekly earnings. This labor market survey is known as the CPS Outgoing Rotations Groups (CPS ORG). For this report, I use data from the monthly CPS from January 2019 to January 2024, and for the CPS ORG I use data from January 2019 to December 2022. I further collapse all the data into quarters.

Figure 1 shows the Labor Force Participation (LFP) rate for Latino and non-Latino workers for the last five years. A worker is in the Labor Force if either is at work or it is actively looking for a job. Figure 1 shows that before the pandemic, Latinos and all other workers had Labor Force participation rates of approximately 77%. Yet, the LFP rate of Latinos decreased more than that of non-Latinos. Figure 1 shows that any differences in LFP from the pandemic disappeared during the recovery.

Figure 2. Employment/Population Ratio

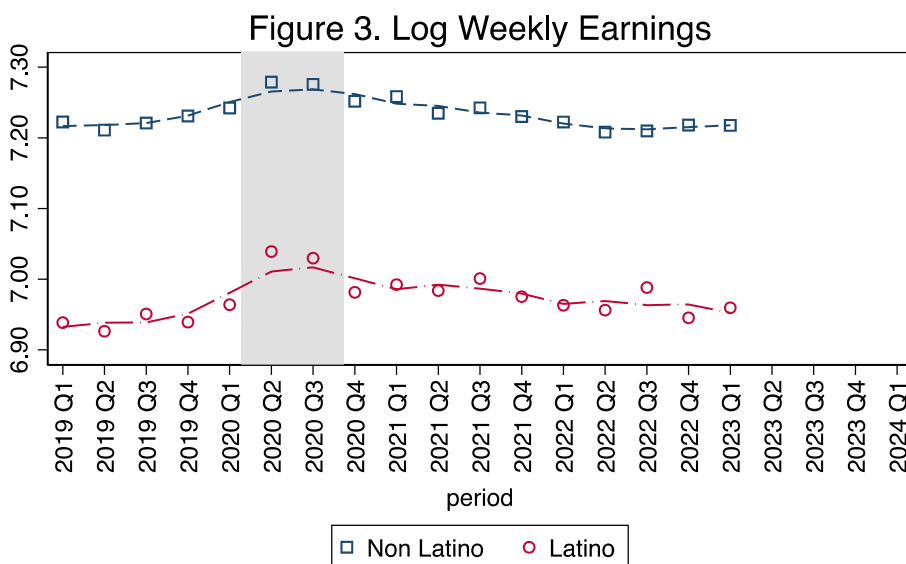


Data: Authors calculations using the 2019-2024 Monthly CPS.  
Sample: all men and women and aged 25-65.

Figure 2 shows that the employment-to-population ratio for Latinos and non-Latinos has recovered during the last five years as well. As is the case with the LFP, the proportion of Latinos employed fell during the pandemic, in this case to less than sixty percent, a drop that is much pronounced than that of non-Latinos. Just as is the case with the LFP, employment rates of Latinos and non-Latinos recovered until either series became practically undistinguishable.

Figure 3 shows weekly earnings from Q1 2019 to Q1 2023. The data is one year shorter because only the ORG report earnings on the CPS. Two things are of note: first, differences in weekly earnings between Latino and non-Latino workers remain relatively constant during the sample period. Second, both groups show a small hump in weekly earnings during the pandemic, perhaps

because low-income workers were more likely to separate from the labor force or be unemployed during the pandemic.



Data: Authors calculations using the 2019-2023 CPS ORG.  
 All wages are in Q1 2024 dollars.  
 Sample: all men and women currently employed and aged 25-65.

Table 1 shows the change for labor force, employment, and weekly earnings post and pre pandemic for different subgroups of Latino workers in the United States. While the data in Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3 suggest that Latino workers’ labor force outcomes have recovered from the pandemic, a closer look to different demographic groups evidences a more nuanced story. First, focusing on LFP, men who attended or graduated college still lag in labor force participation from their 2019 levels. The data, in contrast, show that women and younger workers are more likely to be in the labor force now than before the pandemic. The second column shows the change in employment, and the data suggests that there are differences between men and women: men are less likely to be employed, women are more likely to be employed. Finally, there seem to be no differences on weekly earnings pre and post pandemic.

Table 2 shows data for Latino’s in twenty aggregated industry sectors in the economy. The first column shows the pre- and post- pandemic change of the proportion of workers in the sector, and the second columns the change in weekly earnings for Latinos in each sector. The data shows that the proportion of Latinos in agriculture has decreased since the pandemic, and in turn, Latinos have increased their participation in eleven different industries. Of note: informatics, educational services, and accommodation and services all saw increases larger than three percentage points of Latinos in their workforce. Turning to weekly earnings, the data suggests that Latinos do not earn less now, in real dollars, than before the pandemic, and in two occupations, professional and administrative services, they have substantially increased their earnings.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	$\Delta$ LFP	$\Delta$ Employment	$\Delta$ Weekly Earnings
Men	-0.020 (0.004)	-0.012 (0.005)	-12.133 (20.923)
Women	0.017 (0.006)	0.023 (0.006)	26.364 (19.703)
HS Drop	0.000 (0.008)	0.015 (0.009)	23.857 (18.727)
HS Grad	0.006 (0.007)	0.003 (0.007)	-4.349 (21.008)
Some PSE	-0.017 (0.007)	-0.005 (0.008)	-10.055 (27.795)
College	-0.013 (0.007)	-0.008 (0.008)	-61.451 (37.809)
Age 25-34	0.011 (0.006)	0.010 (0.007)	65.889 (22.110)
Age 35-44	0.002 (0.007)	0.009 (0.007)	-53.410 (29.015)
Age 45-54	-0.006 (0.007)	0.007 (0.008)	10.396 (31.397)
Age 55-64	0.001 (0.010)	0.009 (0.010)	-33.949 (40.255)

Notes: author's calculations using the 2019-2023 Current Population Survey. The sample includes all men and women 24 years of age or older.

## Conclusion

In this piece, I document the evolution of labor force participation, employment, and earnings of Latinos during the last five years. Notwithstanding the negative, perverse effects from the pandemic, Latinos have broadly recovered in the labor market. Yet, a more careful look at the data shows that some subgroups of Latinos are still lagging behind in their recovery.

	(1)		(2)	
	Δ Proportion in Sector Latino		Δ Weekly Earnings	
Agriculture	-0.034	(0.014)	53.966	(46.484)
Construction	0.009	(0.020)	13.135	(234.191)
Manufacturing	0.015	(0.007)	-24.448	(38.522)
Wholesale Trade	0.018	(0.005)	13.327	(43.523)
Retail Trade	0.022	(0.010)	-162.747	(94.906)
Transportation and Warehousing	0.002	(0.005)	33.488	(44.867)
Utilities	0.017	(0.007)	16.264	(60.878)
Information	0.031	(0.012)	-123.167	(237.171)
Finance and Insurance	0.012	(0.009)	114.849	(169.966)
Real Estate	0.002	(0.006)	-104.83	(91.529)
Professional	-0.004	(0.010)	242.662	(101.729)
Management of Companies	-0.001	(0.004)	6.117	(94.044)
Administrative Services	0.015	(0.047)	1200.563	(500.728)
Educational Services	0.037	(0.009)	-43.65	(43.411)
Health Care	0.004	(0.004)	-49.034	(53.882)
Entertainment and Recreation	0.011	(0.004)	-27.863	(43.050)
Accommodation and Food Services	0.036	(0.010)	1.889	(126.762)
Other Services	0.018	(0.008)	46.242	(34.045)
Public Administration	0.019	(0.007)	78.459	(52.439)
Military	0.012	(0.005)	-4.375	(74.427)

Notes: author's calculations using the 2019-2023 Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Groups. The sample includes all men and women 24 years of age or older.

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# Insights about Hispanic and Immigrant Households' Food Insecurity in the United States and the Role of SNAP

Alfonso Flores-Lagunes and Judith Liu<sup>1</sup>

Inequalities in outcomes across demographic groups in the United States have been salient and persistent over time, and there is a growing interest among policymakers to address and ameliorate these inequalities (The White House, 2021; Perry and Hamilton, 2021; Briggs and McGahey, 2022). Food insecurity, defined as a household having difficulty providing enough food for its members due to a lack of resources (Rabbitt et al., 2023), serves as a crucial indicator for household well-being and sheds light on the broader economic and social challenges that households face. Importantly, non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic households perennially have higher food insecurity rates (22.4% and 20.8% in 2022) than non-Hispanic White households (9.3%) (Rabbitt et al., 2023). Notably, important disparities in food insecurity have emerged between foreign-born and US-born Hispanic households for most years, while such disparities are less pronounced for other racial and ethnic groups (Figure 1). Food insecurity is linked to a myriad of health, psychological, and behavioral problems, especially for children (Alaimo et al., 2001; Bailey et al., 2023; Cook et al., 2006; Crawford & Webb, 2011; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2003; Larson & Story, 2011; Leung et al., 2020; Slack & Yoo, 2005; Weinreb et al., 2002; Whitaker et al., 2006). Childhood resource deprivation often leads to significant detrimental long-run consequences, even though this condition is preventable.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the largest food and nutrition assistance program in the US, is central to improving food security and mitigating the effects of poverty among economically vulnerable households. While SNAP ameliorates the exposure to food insecurity by households on average, it is certain that it does not completely erase the inequality of exposure across households belonging to different demographic groups. Flores-Lagunes et al. (forthcoming) proposes a method to analyze some of the reasons behind the pervasive inequality in exposure to food insecurity across groups. This method can also be employed to analyze the inequality incidence of changes to SNAP. These analyses are relevant since, with the recent [discontinuation](#) of pandemic-era benefits, the implementation of [stricter](#) eligibility requirements for SNAP, and proposed cuts to the program, minority and immigrant families in need are left with fewer resources, thus preserving and likely increasing inequality. In this article, we analyze Hispanic relative to non-Hispanic White households and foreign-born Hispanic relative to US-born Hispanic households, aiming to understand some of their existing inequalities in food insecurity and the role played by SNAP.

Our prior work (Flores-Lagunes et al., forthcoming) analyzed how SNAP can differentially mitigate exposure to food insecurity by race and ethnicity. We proposed a simple framework that decomposes differences in SNAP benefits between groups into three policy components. The

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first component is *eligibility*—reflecting the group difference in the proportions of households that are eligible for the program; the second is *participation*—reflecting the group difference in program participation rates; the third is *generosity*—reflecting the group difference in benefit levels that participating households receive. The first and last components are a function of program rules and household characteristics. Each of the three components can be viewed as the impact of a counterfactual experiment conducted within a group’s households that alters the distribution of each component to match that of the other group’s counterparts, while holding fixed all other factors. By construction, these three policy components add up to the overall difference in mean benefit levels between groups.

An attractive feature of this framework is that the decomposition of group differences in SNAP benefit levels is easily linked to those in policy-relevant outcomes, such as food spending and the food resource gap (i.e., the relative amount needed by the household to meet basic food needs). We show that the mechanical decomposition of group differences in SNAP benefits connects directly to group differences in food spending through a proportionality factor given by the marginal propensity to spend on food (MPSF) out of SNAP benefits for the group of interest. The relative importance of eligibility, participation, and generosity from the decomposition remains the same, whether looking at SNAP benefits or food spending. Once linked to food spending, the decomposition can also be linked to group differences in the food resource gap, considered a measure for food insecurity. This framework allows policymakers to understand how changes to SNAP policies, beyond their effects on overall outcomes, may alter the picture of inequality in outcomes across different demographic groups.

The framework also allows us to consider simulations to evaluate the effects of changes in SNAP policy on the relative food resource gap across groups—that is, on inequality. We consider three separate marginal changes to each of the policy components of the program: a 20 percent decrease in gross and net income limits to qualify for SNAP, a 20 percent decrease in SNAP participation rates, and a 20 percent decrease in SNAP benefit levels for eligible households. These policy scenarios can be associated with recent policy proposals being considered by policy makers.<sup>2</sup> Also, it must be kept in mind that, as with any counterfactual analysis, there are maintained assumptions, which are discussed in Flores-Lagunes et al. (forthcoming).

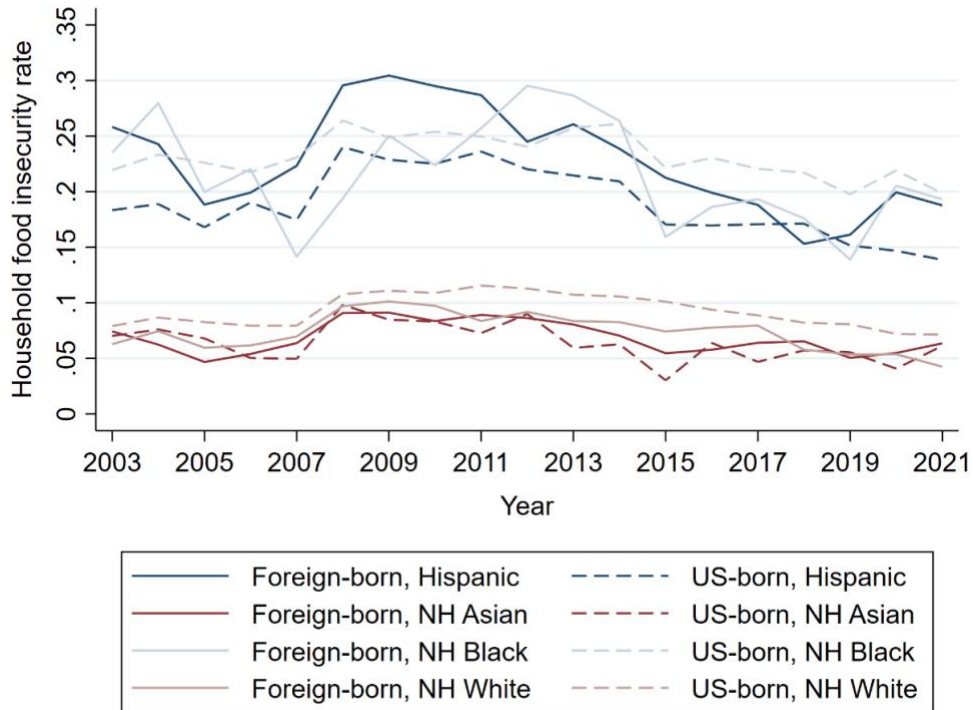
We use data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) and its Food Security Supplement (FSS) between 2003 and 2016. Additionally, we incorporate information from the SNAP Policy Database (available up to 2016). Our sample consists of households below 185 percent of the poverty line or those that report being short of money for food, as they constitute the target population in the CPS-FSS. Therefore, these households are more economically disadvantaged than the general population. We incorporate sampling weights provided with the CPS-FSS that adjust for the CPS sampling design and differential response in the FSS. Given that program eligibility is not available in the data, we impute it using the procedure in Flores-Lagunes et al. (forthcoming). Lastly, we provide a word of caution on this survey data which, despite being the

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, see <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/2024-food-stamp-rent-assistance-programs-get-hit-hard-rcna130833>

prime source for national statistics on food insecurity, it has been documented to suffer from program participation under-reporting (e.g., Meyer et al., 2022). Furthermore, reports of immigrant status in the CPS may also contain errors (Bernhardt and Wunnava, 2023). Additional discussion about these data is provided in Flores-Lagunes et al. (forthcoming).

Figure 1: Food insecurity by race, ethnicity, and immigrant status, 2003-2021



Note: Author's calculations using data from the 2003-2021 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

Descriptive statistics reveal that Hispanic households receive an unconditional mean SNAP benefit of \$64 per month, which is \$35 more than that received by non-Hispanic White households (\$29). While 44% of Hispanic households in this sample are eligible for SNAP, a significantly higher rate than the 25% eligibility among non-Hispanic White households, there is a lower uptake among eligible Hispanic households (42% vs. 49%). Among Hispanic households participating in SNAP, the mean monthly benefit is \$344, exceeding the amount received by participating non-Hispanic White households (\$238). This is a reflection of the different household characteristics in each group. When considering the immigrant status of the household head, foreign-born Hispanic households receive lower unconditional mean benefits (\$60) than their US-born Hispanic counterparts (\$69), even though they experience higher rates of food insecurity (Figure 1). Notably, foreign-born Hispanic households are more likely to be eligible for SNAP compared to their US-born counterparts (47% vs. 41%), but despite this eligibility, they are less inclined to take up the benefits (35% vs. 52%). Among those who do take it up, foreign-born households receive higher benefits (\$358 vs. \$326).

The decomposition analysis in Table 1 shows that the eligibility component of SNAP plays a significant role in providing SNAP benefits to Hispanic households (80%) compared to non-Hispanic White households, followed by generosity (36%). This aligns with the notion that, as a group, Hispanic households encounter more disadvantages, making them more likely to qualify for SNAP when compared to non-Hispanic White households. Notably, the participation component of SNAP *reduces* SNAP benefits for Hispanic households by 16% relative to non-Hispanic White households. The disparity in SNAP benefits between foreign-born and US-born Hispanic households is primarily attributed to the large negative participation component, accounting for -267% of the difference, which dominates the positive eligibility (93%) and generosity (74%) components. This insight is highly suggestive of a reluctance of eligible foreign-born Hispanic households to participate in SNAP.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1: Decomposition of Group Differences in SNAP Benefits

	Hispanic – NH White		Foreign-born – US-born Hispanic	
	Estimates	Relative Importance of the component	Estimates	Relative Importance of the component
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Overall difference in SNAP benefits	35.37 [1.26]		-8.93 [2.35]	
Eligibility	28.22 [0.72]	80% [0.01]	8.31 [0.86]	93% [0.44]
Participation	-5.74 [0.55]	-16% [0.02]	-23.89 [1.52]	-267% [0.90]
Generosity	12.89 [0.62]	36% [0.01]	6.65 [1.64]	74% [0.48]

Notes: Data from the 2003-2016 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS). The sample is composed of households below 185 percent of the poverty line or that report being short of money for food (the target population of the FSS) and with complete information on food expenditures. Bootstrapped standard errors (in brackets) are obtained with 1,000 bootstrap replications.

Table 2 shows the results of linking the decomposition analysis to food spending (through the MPSF) and the food resource gap. The first row indicates the difference in food spending across groups that is explained by SNAP benefits, which is equal to \$11 for Hispanic households relative to non-Hispanic White households and to -\$3 for foreign-born Hispanic households relative to US-born Hispanic households. The latter figure is consistent with a *decrease* in food spending for foreign-born relative to US-born Hispanic households as a result of SNAP. The second row shows the differences in the food resource gap (the third and fourth row show details on this difference), indicating that Hispanic households face a \$58 larger gap relative to non-Hispanic White households, while the gap is \$18 between foreign-born and US-born Hispanic households.

<sup>3</sup> This could also be related to our inability to tell apart foreign-born-headed Hispanic households who in reality are not eligible for SNAP due to being illegal in the country or recently arrived.

The last row reports the percentage of the relative food resource gap that SNAP is able to close. For Hispanic relative to non-Hispanic White households, SNAP reduces this gap by 18% (10.61/58.32). However, SNAP *increases* the relative food resource gap between foreign-born and US-born Hispanic households by 15% (-2.68/18.09).

Table 2: Relative Food Resource Gap and SNAP

	Hispanic – NH White (1)	Foreign-born – US-born Hispanic (2)
Difference in food spending explained by SNAP	10.61	-2.68
Difference in food resource gaps (\$/month)	58.32	18.09
Mean of Group 1 (Hispanic; Foreign-born)	54.96	62.87
Mean of Group 0 (NH White; US-born)	-3.36	44.79
Change in relative food resource gap led by SNAP	↓18%	↑15%

Notes: This table reports means for the analysis samples in 2003-2016 CPS. We focus on households below 185 percent of the poverty line or that report being short of money for food (the target population of the FSS) with complete information on food expenditures. To match with the frequency of SNAP benefit distribution, we multiply the reported food resource gap by four to obtain the monthly values of these variables. The difference in food spending explained by SNAP is calculated as the product of the difference in monthly SNAP benefit levels and the marginal propensity to spend on food (MPSF) from SNAP benefits (0.3 for Hispanic households and 0.4 for non-Hispanic White households). For more details on how we estimate the MPSF, see Flores-Lagunes et al. (forthcoming).

Recent proposals of changes to SNAP imply lower SNAP benefits, tightened eligibility criteria, and other changes that generally discourage participation. The top panel of Table 3 illustrates three hypothetical policy scenarios and their predicted impacts on disparities in food insecurity for Hispanic relative to non-Hispanic White households. The first column presents the baseline (status-quo) figures under the current SNAP. In the second column we consider a scenario with a 20% decrease in income eligibility limits, making it harder to gain eligibility to the program. Under this scenario, the difference in SNAP benefits between Hispanic and non-Hispanic White households would shrink to \$22 (37%). As a result, the inequality in the food resource gap would increase by 7% (from \$58 to \$62). Out of the three counterfactual policies considered, this one would have the most detrimental impact on inequality since it affects a fundamental component for Hispanic households: eligibility. The counterfactual policy scenarios related to participation and generosity (columns 3 and 4) would induce somewhat smaller changes, although they too increase inequality. In a scenario with a 20% decrease in SNAP participation, the resources needed to meet basic food needs would increase by 4% (to \$61) for Hispanic households relative

to non-Hispanic White households. Similarly, a scenario decreasing SNAP generosity by 20% would result in a 4% higher relative food resource gap (\$60).

Table 3: Counterfactual Policy Experiments

	Baseline	Counterfactual Policy Experiments		
	(1)	Decrease income eligibility limits by 20% (2)	Decrease participation rates by 20% (3)	Decrease benefit levels by 20% (4)
<b>Hispanic – White Households</b>				
Difference in SNAP benefits	35.37	22.38	26.89	28.30
Difference in food resource gaps	58.32	62.22	60.86	60.44
<b>Foreign-born – US-born Hispanic Households</b>				
Difference in SNAP benefits	-8.93	-8.64	-5.18	-6.92
Difference in food resource gaps	18.09	18.00	16.97	17.49

Notes: This table displays the differences in SNAP benefits and the food resource gap between Hispanic and non-Hispanic White households, and between foreign-born and US-born Hispanic households. Column 1 shows the baseline figures under the current SNAP. Columns 2-4 respectively show hypothesized changes to SNAP policy rules, including a 20 percent decrease in gross and net income limits to qualify for SNAP; a 20 percent decrease in participation rates; a 20 percent decrease in benefit levels for eligible households.

The bottom panel of Table 3 presents the predicted impacts of the same set of hypothetical policy scenarios for foreign-born relative to US-born Hispanic households. Out of the three scenarios, the one affecting participation (column 3) would have the most pronounced impact for these groups. While a decrease in participation by 20% (column 3) would decrease food insecurity for Hispanic households as a group, the inequality in SNAP benefits received between foreign-born and US-born Hispanic households would decrease by \$4 (42%). In turn, the inequality in food resource gaps would slightly decrease by \$1 (6%). That the highest impact on inequality is from the counterfactual scenario related to participation is consistent with its relative importance found in the decomposition analysis. For the other two hypothetical scenarios, the implications for inequality between foreign-born and US-born Hispanic households are much smaller, implying impacts on the food resource gap of less than ten cents (column 2) and six cents (column 4).

The above results provide insights about how the existing SNAP and changes to it can impact not only the exposure to food insecurity in general, but also ameliorate or exacerbate inequality in that exposure across demographic groups. For instance, this analysis implies that decreases in the eligibility of SNAP not only exacerbate food insecurity in general, but also worsen the inequality across Hispanic and non-Hispanic White households. Moreover, the above analysis also implies that changes to SNAP that hinder participation not only exacerbate the inequality in food insecurity between Hispanic and non-Hispanic White households, but also between foreign-born and US-born Hispanic households. To the extent that policymakers and taxpayers care about the inequality in outcomes across demographic groups, the recently proposed changes to SNAP should also be evaluated in light of these predicted inequality impacts.

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## Natural Experiments Are Double-Edged Swords

Stephan Lefebvre<sup>1</sup>

Natural experiments are a double-edged sword: they can help us quantify causal effects but every so-called natural experiment also presents an opportunity to depoliticize history, downplay intergroup competition ([Darity Jr., 2005](#)), and obscure the role of the nation-state. This critique emerges from an engagement with stratification economics and Latinx Studies ([Lefebvre et al., 2024](#)). Applying Critical Latinx Studies ([Ramos-Zayas & Ru'a, 2021](#)), this article shows how particular approaches to natural experiments can manufacture ignorance for certain economic phenomena even as they add to our knowledge on others ([Mueller, 2018](#)).

The critique articulated here (“natural experiments as double-edged swords”) operates at the level of disciplinary norms; it applies to collections of scholarly articles, not individual papers. While related to the more general argument that economics is over-reductive ([Jackson, 2013](#)), this critique is grounded in stratification economics, meaning that ignorance is understood to serve an instrumental purpose for particular groups as they compete for relative position in a social hierarchy. My point of departure for illustrating natural experiments as a double-edged sword is economists’ research on the Mariel boatlift. Economics research could be improved, especially with respect to marginalized groups ([Kvangraven & Surbhi, 2021](#); [Mason et al., 2005](#)), if those who use natural experiments are aware of potential pitfalls.

### Economics Research on the Mariel Boatlift

The Mariel boatlift refers to when an estimated 125,000 Cuban nationals arrived in South Florida over 5 months during the summer of 1980 ([Bustamante & Manzor, 2021](#)). Based on citations of economists’ writing about the event (see Bibliography), the 2021 Nobel prize, awarded to David Card in part for research related to the boatlift ([Committee for the Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, 2021](#)), and the popularity of this episode in pedagogical materials, economists seem quite interested in the Mariel boatlift. [Card \(1990\)](#), the first paper to frame the event as a natural experiment, has over 2923 citations; Borjas’ ([2003](#)) response attempting to overturn [Card \(1990\)](#) has over 3594 citations. The Nobel Committee awarded the prize to Card for advances in “answering causal questions using observational data” and, referring to the boatlift, the committee remarked on how Card “utilized a unique event in US history” to deal with “the confounding impact of immigrants moving to booming local labor markets” ([2021](#), p. 20–21). The Mariel boatlift is nearly ubiquitous in pedagogical materials for causal inference econometrics and labor economics; one of the most popular graduate-level labor economics textbooks ([Cahuc et al., 2014](#), p. xvii) opens with, “On 4 April 1980, following a conflict with the Peruvian government, Cuban President Fidel Castro ordered the guards posted in front of the Peruvian embassy in Havana withdrawn.” Why is there so much interest from economists about this otherwise little-remembered event?

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Natural experiments allow researchers to estimate causal effects in situations where randomized experiments are infeasible. As a general rule, correlations do not imply causal relationships, but causal questions are some of the most important that economists deal with. Causal research questions take the form, How does a change in X affect outcome Y? In the natural sciences, labs are used to repeatedly run experiments where entities are randomly assigned X and all other observable characteristics are held equal. In clinical trials, a wide range of participants are recruited such that the control and treatment groups (those receiving the placebo and the candidate medicine) are balanced: we do not need all individuals to be identical (hold all else equal), but we need an equal proportion of, say, men and women in the treatment and control group so that any systematic difference in average outcome between the groups is attributed to the treatment, not other factors. In many settings, economists cannot repeatedly generate random economic shocks to determine their effects. The methodology of natural experiments uses real-world situations where observational units can be interpreted as having received a random shock.

The Mariel boatlift is a natural experiment because it can be interpreted as a random immigration shock representing a shift out of the labor supply curve. Since [Card \(1990\)](#), economists have used this setting to test the model of supply and demand applied to labor markets. Narrowly, the research question is, How are wages and employment in a local labor market like Miami affected by an increase in the number of foreign-born workers? A critical assumption of supply and demand analysis is *ceteris paribus*; the real-world analogue of shifting a supply curve must be a discrete change in the determinants of supply that does not affect the demand curve. In other words, the shock (immigration increase) cannot be related to other factors that affect wages in Miami (e.g. a surge in demand for labor that attracts workers).

[Card \(1990\)](#) reasoned that treatment is arguably random with respect to timing and the number of immigrants because neither was driven by the characteristics of the Miami labor market. If cities with booming local labor markets are those that attract the largest number of immigrants, then a positive correlation between migration and wages does not tell us about the effects of immigrants on local wages because of reverse causality. When events are predictable, it is difficult to statistically distinguish causal effects from anticipatory effects. The Mariel boatlift surprised the general public in Cuba and in the US; the increase in foreign-born workers in Miami was not a response to favorable conditions in Miami nor was it anticipated.

Card's [\(1990\)](#) main finding, reaffirmed in multiple studies [\(Clemens and Hunt \(2019\)\)](#), is that immigration does not have negative effects on local labor markets. Research on the Mariel boatlift is evidence that the simple supply and demand model for labor predicting lower wages or higher unemployment, can be wrong or misleading and that caution should be used when formulating policy based on this model. These findings are helpful for labor and migrants' rights advocates because immigrants' are often scapegoated for poor labor market outcomes with little evidence, even in situations where the increase in workers is smaller and more gradual than the Mariel boatlift. Even so, a different reading of the literature shows that the Mariel boatlift is only interesting to economists insofar as it functions as a natural experiment. Although there are important debates in the literature around the central question of immigration's effects on local

labor markets and the methodological problem of using the non-experimental data to generate credible causal estimates, in this article I am more interested in the questions that economists ask and how disciplinary norms around natural experiments reveal or obscure knowledge.

The fundamental logic of natural experiments is illustrated well by the Mariel boatlift literature: the researcher tests a hypothesis related to a theoretical model in a particular setting. They must argue that the setting is informative more broadly and that the characteristic details of the event and the people involved can be ignored in order to apply the findings more broadly. The case of the Mariel boatlift research shows how disciplinary norms and incentive structures promote the broadest claims of generalizability, in part because these are of “general interest” to the largest number of economists. The Bibliography’s starred entries show titles ranging from “The Impact of the Mariel Boatlift on the Miami Labor Market” to “Measuring Immigration’s Effects on Labor Demand” to “The Labor Demand Curve Is Downward Sloping,” showing both a range of scopes and a preference for ever broader generalizing. Crafting and testing general theory by studying particular settings is not a problem in itself but, as illustrated by the Mariel boatlift literature, when it comes to marginalized people the economic phenomena rendered invisible across many papers are often those that threaten hegemonic power.

#### What is missing from the Mariel boatlift research?

Every so-called natural experiment presents an opportunity for the researcher to depoliticize history. History is depoliticized when research on the Mariel boatlift fails to mention the Cold War or, more broadly, capitalist imperialism ([Desai & Heller, 2019](#)). The boatlift occurred just months before a presidential election, incumbent Jimmy Carter was in the fight of his life against the vocally anti-communist Ronald Reagan. The boatlift occurred in a swing state, in a country that historically offered Cuban refugees significant material and legal assistance for resettlement, and in a region where ordinary people, the business community, and political leaders came together to welcome the newcomers. The Cold War took place through proxy wars and propaganda—official policy was designed to show US style capitalism and elections were superior to the alternatives pursued by China and the USSR—but it was a hot war in much of the periphery, including Cuba. Propaganda in the US successfully convinced many that the government was fighting for the principles of democracy and freedom from totalitarianism, but the West’s anti-democratic actions in the interest of global capital are well documented and understood outside of the US ([Chomsky, 1991](#)). None of the starred entries in the Bibliography refer to the Cold War. Almost none of the papers mention communism; those that do (e.g. [Anastasopoulos et al. \(2021\)](#)) discuss communism as a reason for migrants to leave Cuba, ignoring anti-communist sentiment in the US, which is of greater significance given that the papers study US labor markets.

How is Cold War anti-communism relevant, given the goals of causal inference econometrics? Only by accounting for context can one argue that the event is generalizable to other specific settings. Would the labor market dynamics observed in this setting be similar for immigrants from any other country (Haiti, Palestine, Yemen, China) in a different political context? None of the papers offer informed guidance or reflections on this question.

More broadly, the economics literature on the Mariel boatlift demonstrates a willful ignorance of US capitalist imperialism, which explains the events at the center of the natural experiment and which may be relevant for the outcomes of interest. In order to focus on testing a model of supply and demand, the reader is asked to look past the US government's decade's long aggression toward a small but proximate country's "example of socialist revolution and assertion of national sovereignty" ([Desai & Heller, 2019](#)). Neither [Card \(1990\)](#) nor any of the other papers analyzing the Mariel boatlift use the results to better understand class conflict and anti-imperialism in Cuba nor anti-communism and imperialism in the US. [Keely \(2001, p. 308\)](#) writes, "the goal of the refugee regime was not to help restore stability to the international system but to destabilize governments, cause states to fail, and create domestic support for a policy of opposing and weakening communist governments in a constant struggle." The US government did not seriously attempt to stop the Mariel boatlift and the successful integration of Cuban nationals into the economy was understood to be potentially useful for propaganda as evidence of US-style capitalism's success at a time when the Cuban economy was faced difficulties.

Natural experiments present an opportunity to downplay intergroup competition. Cuban Americans would later achieve mainstream political success at the city, state, and national level. The Mariel boatlift was one of their first opportunities to test and build political power under the heightened scrutiny of a national election. But Afro-Cubans have largely been left out of this success story ([Aja, 2016](#)). The 25,000 Haitian immigrants that arrived in South Florida received some of the benefits that the Marielitos received only after significant protest by the Congressional Black Caucus, and even the limited similar treatment did not last. Cuban immigrants are typically seen as "political refugees" and Haitian immigrants are "economic migrants." These categories have become reified over time such that there can seem to be differences in the people, but an alternative interpretation is that these administrative categories are convenient ways for the US to maintain racialized immigration policies that favor the interests of global capital and US control. None of the papers contextualize the Mariel boatlift in terms of the Cuban American community's strategic use of anti-communism to position themselves as 'the good kind of immigrant.'

Designations such as "refugee," "asylum-seeker," and "economic migrant" are technologies of population control. They may have some use in describing reality, but legal categories with national and international implications are always contested and inconsistently applied based on group power. Since at least 1969, the Cuban American experience with immigration is singular, characterized by relatively favorable immigration rules ([Nackerud et al., 1999](#)). Significant refugee and resettlement aid was provided for Cubans arriving in the US as part of the boatlift ([Zucker, 1983](#)). It was the Mariel boatlift itself that tested, for the first time, the US's commitment to international conventions on the rights of refugees and the recently passed Refugee Act of 1980 ([Aleinikoff, 1996](#)). Initially, so-called Marielitos were admitted into the US as refugees and paroled under the Attorney General's discretionary power ([Kemple, 1988; Erickson, 1988](#), for important exceptions, see). In practice, Marielitos were refugees with no expectation of return and they were parolees with no conditions on their parole, illustrating significant legal flexibility. In the context of economic analysis of the Mariel boatlift as a natural experiment, the singular benefits granted to Cuban immigrants seems relevant—perhaps other groups should be granted

equally favorable terms given the generally good outcomes found in [Card \(1990\)](#) and follow-up papers.

This article presents a critique of natural experiments as double-edged swords. While they have the potential to add to our knowledge by providing unbiased estimates of causal phenomena, they also run the risk of constituting anti-knowledge. I became aware of this dynamic because, as a Cuban American economist from Miami, reading the economics literature on the Mariel boatlift literature left me feeling hollow. It seemed interested only to the extent that the events' characteristic details could be erased for the sake of generalization. From Latinx Studies and outside literature, I learned about the horrors of unaccompanied minors, part of the Mariel boatlift, who were housed in military bases, screaming and attempting suicide at night ([Cohen et al., 1985](#)).

This critique operates at the level of the discipline. No one paper can be faulted for an overly reductive use of the Mariel boatlift—I do not argue that we should abandon natural experiments altogether—but reading across the literature does reveal a lack of interest in the lives of Latinxs that is part of what members of ASHE work to correct, producing knowledge about and for ourselves. Hopefully using methodologies that are in conversation with other work on Latinxs lives, Latinx Studies and stratification economics. In future work, I plan to develop this critique and propose ways to work with natural experiments to avoid depoliticizing history, downplaying intergroup competition, and obscuring the role of the nation-state.

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Starred papers constitute a sample obtained from EconLit search of “Mariel boatlift” in abstracts (31 results), removing duplicates (13), papers that have only a passing reference to the Mariel boatlift (2), papers not written by economists (1), and dissertations or reports (4) and adding papers Borjas (2003), Card (2012), Ottaviano and Peri (2012), Borjas (2019), and Anastasopoulos et al. (2021), which did not appear in the initial search. Citations numbers refer to Google Scholar citations as of February 5, 2024.

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## Puerto Rican Migrants to the US Mainland Post-Hurricane Maria

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### Introduction

A century after the passage of the 1917 Jones-Shafroth Act, which collectively granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship, Puerto Rico confronted an economic crisis and massive net outmigration *before* Hurricane Maria (e.g., Mora, Rodríguez and Dávila, 2021; Mora, Davila, and Rodríguez, 2018a). Indeed, in May 2017, several months before Hurricane Maria landed, the government of Puerto Rico had filed for bankruptcy (Scoria, and Gillers, 2017) as Puerto Ricans on the island and mainland were facing grave and unprecedented economic, social, and demographic challenges and opportunities following more than a decade of a severe economic decline (e.g., Mora, Rodríguez and Dávila, 2021; contributions to the Spring 2018 *Hispanic Economic Outlook*).

Hurricane Maria landed in Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017. Lack of government spending in infrastructure as well as the hurricane's winds and flooding, contributed to thousands of deaths, officially 2,975, and was followed by a very slow recovery (e.g., Mora, Rodríguez and Dávila, 2021; Pérez-Lugo, Ortiz-García, and Valdés, 2021). In the immediate aftermath, the island's then-3.3 million residents were left without electricity, running water, telecommunications, and basic transportation systems. Even after three months, electricity had not been restored to nearly half of the island (Robles and Bidgood, 2017).

Before Hurricane Maria, the economic crisis in the island, which started in 2006, had already resulted in the largest number of Puerto Ricans migrating to the mainland (Mora, Rodríguez, and Dávila, 2021). After Hurricane Maria hit, the out-migration accelerated. According to the Puerto Rico Institute of Statistics, in 2016 more than 88 thousand Puerto Ricans left the island for the mainland; in 2018, after Hurricane Maria, the number increased to 133 thousand. To be sure, Puerto Ricans have continued migrating to the mainland in large numbers. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, the Puerto Rican population in the U.S. grew by 300,000 in six years, from 5.5 million in 2016 to 5.8 million in 2021; part of this increase has also been generated through births on the mainland.

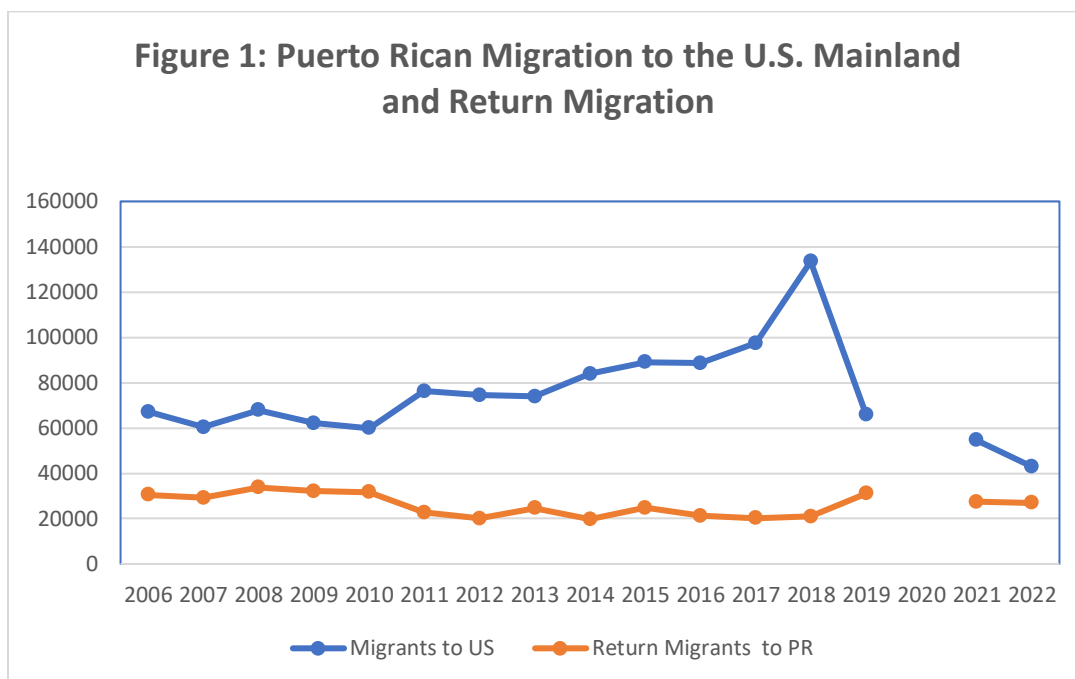
Puerto Ricans represent a significant population: 3.3 million on the island and 5.8 million on the mainland. Their presence and impact are increasing on the mainland, including in non-traditional settlement areas, particularly in Florida (an "old-new" area) and Texas (e.g., Mora, Rodríguez, and Dávila, 2021; Mora, Dávila, and Rodríguez, 2017a, 2017b). Hurricane Maria can be interpreted as a shock to health and economic conditions in Puerto Rico and thus may have resulted in a change in the characteristics of worker migrating from Puerto Rico and their labor force attachments. Our research investigates the characteristics of outmigrants, return migrants

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and the economic performance of recently arrived Puerto Rican migrants in the mainland before and after Hurricane Maria. The analysis is based on individual-level data from the American Community Survey and the Puerto Rican Community Survey made available through the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) 2014 to 2019 (Ruggles et al., 2023). The analysis focuses on individuals ages 25 to 64.



Source: Perfil Migrante, Instituto de Estadísticas de Puerto Rico, <https://estadisticas.pr/en/publicaciones/perfil-del-migrante>

In particular, one goal of our research is to further explore whether there have been changes in characteristics of Puerto Rican migrants to the mainland relative to the Puerto Rican population in the island after Hurricane Maria. We expand on previous work on Puerto Rican migration by Mora, Dávila, and Rodríguez (2017b, 2017c), and others, focused on the pre-Hurricane Maria timeframe by analyzing migration data after Hurricane Maria and comparing characteristics of migrants before and after the hurricane. Moreover, we analyze characteristics of return migrants and how they changed after Hurricane Maria.

### Data

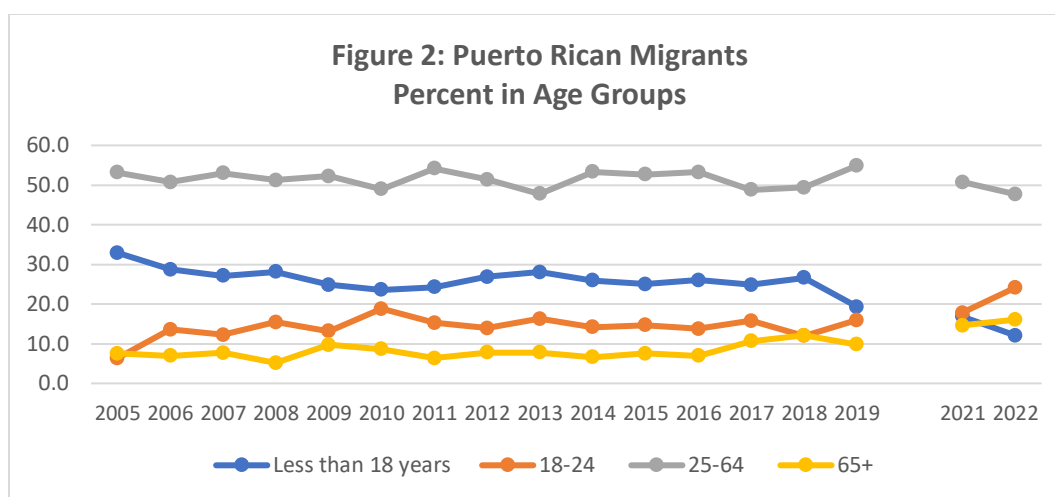
For the analysis we use the American Community Survey (ACS) and Puerto Rican Community Survey (PRC) for the years 2014 to 2019.<sup>4</sup> The sample includes working-age adults, ages 25 to 64.

<sup>4</sup> The American Community Survey (ACS) is an annual demographics survey program conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. The survey regularly gathers information previously contained only in the long form of the decennial census, including ancestry, citizenship, educational attainment, income, language proficiency, migration, disability, employment, and housing characteristics. The Puerto Rican Community Survey (PRCS) is similar to the ACS but it is conducted in Puerto Rico.

We did not include year 2020 due to problems in data collection during the COVID-19 epidemic. We also chose not to include 2021 because it may reflect factors related to the pandemic. A Puerto Rican migrant is identified as an individual in the ACS who was born in Puerto Rico and migrated to the U.S. mainland from Puerto Rico the previous year.

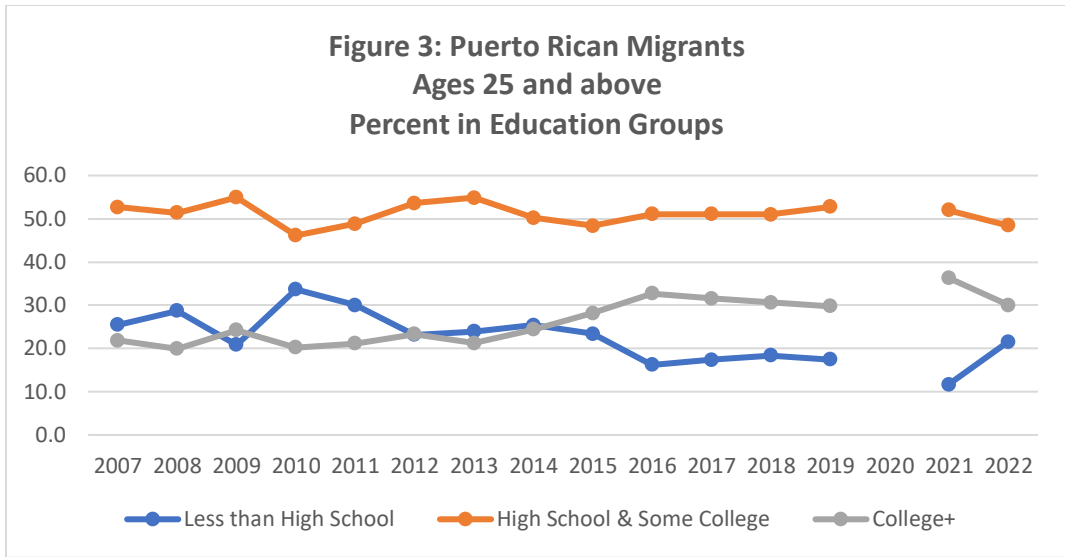
## Migration

Between 2005 and 2019 approximately 1.1 million Puerto Ricans migrated to the U.S. mainland (see figure 1). Migration grew rapidly during the financial crisis, the number of migrants increased from 47 thousand in 2005 to 88 thousand in 2016. However, Hurricane Maria pushed migration of Puerto Ricans to new historically high levels, the number of migrants increased to more than 97 thousand in 2017, the year when Hurricane Maria landed in Puerto Rico and by 2018 the number increased to 133 thousand. In 2019, two years after Hurricane Maria, the number of migrants slowed to 66 thousand.



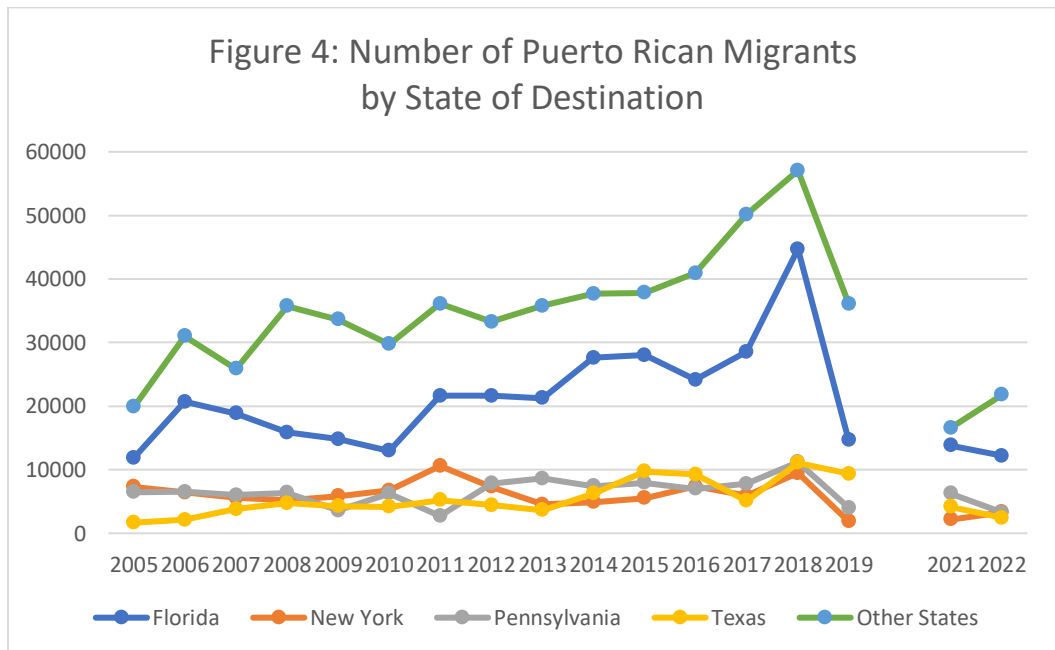
Source: Perfil Migrante, Instituto de Estadísticas de Puerto Rico, <https://estadisticas.pr/en/publicaciones/perfil-del-migrante>

Since 2005, there has been an increase in the proportion of Puerto Rican migrants who are ages 18 to 24 and 65 and older. There has also been a decline in migration of children. These may be partly due to demographic changes in Puerto Rico. The proportion of Puerto Rican migrants who are working-age adults, ages 25 to 64, has remained relatively stable since 2005 with a small increase immediately after Hurricane Maria (see figure 2). Moreover, since 2005 there has been an increase in proportion of Puerto Rican migrants who have college degrees (see figure 3). However, this trend started before Hurricane Maria.



Source: Perfil Migrante, Instituto de Estadísticas de Puerto Rico, <https://estadisticas.pr/en/publicaciones/perfil-del-migrante>

Many Puerto Rican migrants locate in four states: Florida, New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Florida is the most important destination, receiving 25-30% of migrants. The other three states receive 5-10% of migrants. After Hurricane Maria, the proportion of migrants moving to Florida increased substantially from 27% in 2016 to 34% in 2018. Texas has experienced a substantial increase in migration from 2005 to 2019, however the proportion of migrants who located in Texas immediately after Hurricane Maria decreased from 10% in 2016 to 8% in 2018 (see figure 4).



Source: Perfil Migrante, Instituto de Estadísticas de Puerto Rico, <https://estadisticas.pr/en/publicaciones/perfil-del-migrante>

Table 1 shows characteristics of Puerto Rican migrants to the US mainland ages 24 to 64 before and after Hurricane Maria. Puerto Rican migrants are less likely to have schooling levels below high school after Hurricane Maria, a decrease from 14.3% to 12.2%. The percent of migrants with some college education increased from 21.6% to 24.6%. The percent of migrants with high school or college degrees did not change after Hurricane Maria, remained at 29% and 35% respectively. The age of Puerto Rican migrants remained the same after the hurricane, on average 40 years. The percent of migrants who are female increased from 49.4% to 52.4%. The percent of migrants who did not speak English decreased from 12.0% to 10.7%. Moreover, their labor force participation increased from 67.5% to 70.6%. These statics suggest Puerto Rican migrants to the mainland after Hurricane Maria had higher schooling levels, better language skills and labor force participation rates than those who migrated between 2014 and 2017.

Table 1: Characteristics of Puerto Rican Migrants and Return Migrants Ages 25 to 64				
Characteristic	Migrants Before Hurricane Maria (2014-2017)	Migrants After Hurricane Maria (2018- 2019)	Return Migrants Before Hurricane Maria (2014-2017)	Return Migrants After Hurricane Maria (2018- 2019)
Education (%)				
Less than HS	14.3	12.2	21.8	11.9
HS	28.9	28.7	32.7	37.6
Some college	21.6	24.6	20.4	25.7
College +	35.2	34.5	25.1	24.8
Age	39.8	39.9	43.3	43.5
Female (%)	49.4	52.4	48.2	52.5
Married (%)	47.0	45.3	35.4	25.2
Number Children	0.77	0.82	.57	.67
No English (%)	12.00	10.7	12.5	17.3
Labor force (%)	67.5	70.6	47.7	48.5
Observations	1,313	704	367	202
Estimated Number of Migrants	185,310	97,346	44,579	26,226

Return migrants from the mainland are less likely to have schooling levels below high school after Hurricane Maria, a decrease from 21.8% to 11.9% (see table 1). They are more likely to have completed high school, an increase from 32.7% to 37.6%, and some college, increasing from

20.4% to 25.7% after Hurricane Maria. The percent of return migrants with college degrees did not change, remained at 25%. The percent of return migrants who are female increased from 48.2% to 52.5%. The percent who are married decreased from 35.4% to 25.2%, and the average number of children in their households increased from .57 to .67 after Hurricane Maria. The percent of return migrants who did not speak English increased from 12.5% to 17.3%. There were no changes in labor force participation of return migrants after Hurricane Maria. These statistics suggests return migrants from the mainland after Hurricane Maria had higher schooling levels, less English language skills, were increasingly female and had more children living in their households than those who returned between 2014 and 2017.

### Conclusion

During the decade before Hurricane Maria, outmigration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland was already the largest it had ever been due to a difficult and prolonged economic crisis in the island (e.g., Mora, Rodríguez, and Dávila, 2021). After Hurricane Maria hit, the out-migration accelerated. Our paper analyses demographic characteristics of Puerto Rican migrants to the mainland before and after Hurricane Maria using the US mainland Community Survey and the Puerto Rican Community Survey.

We find Puerto Rican migrants to the mainland after Hurricane Maria had higher schooling levels, better language skills and labor force participation rates than those who migrated between 2014 and 2017. Moreover, we find that return migrants from the mainland to the island after Hurricane Maria had higher schooling levels, less English language skills, were increasingly female and had more children living in their households than those who returned between 2014 and 2017.

Differences in the characteristics of Puerto Rican migrants and return migrants during the economic crisis and after Hurricane Maria may reflect changes in the motivation for migration, one due to a grave and unprecedented economic situation, and the other due to a combination of a grave and unprecedented economic situation and dire living conditions in the island immediately after Hurricane Maria.

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