



Global Pandemic Exacerbates Hunger in Puerto Rico

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BY JENNIFER PHILIPP ON AUGUST 14, 2020

COVID-19

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — The small but mighty island of Puerto Rico has been through a lot recently. In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, which devastated the island in 2017, the global COVID-19 pandemic is currently ravaging Puerto Rico. As a result, hunger in Puerto Rico is now a problem with a spotlight shining on it.

In 2016, 44% of the island's population lived in poverty. Prior to the hurricane, 1.5 million people were food insecure. Hurricane Maria [devastated 80% of the crops](#) in Puerto Rico, meaning the island lost about \$780 million in agricultural yields. Before the pandemic, the Food Bank of Puerto Rico served about one million pounds of food per month. That amount has almost doubled since the pandemic, [reaching 1.9 million](#).

In 2016, the tourism industry made up 6% of the island's GDP. By the end of 2019, the industry had recovered even stronger than before Hurricane Maria devastated the island. In 2016, tourists spent \$8.5

million. After the hurricane, the tourism industry made up 6.5%, as [5.2 million visitors](#) spent nearly a billion dollars on hotels and vacation rentals.

Tourism Sector Decline

With the current pandemic, the tourism sector has been out of commission for most of the year so far. On March 15, 2020, Governor Wanda Vázquez Garced enacted the nation's [first mandatory lockdown](#). The lockdown orders hindered the tourism sector. The governor banned large gatherings and encouraged tourists to stay at home. Additionally, theaters, museums, bars, malls and other businesses that attracted tourists had to shut down. Many Puerto Ricans found themselves unemployed in a commonwealth that, despite growing economically, had a population that was still struggling financially. Because of the freeze on tourism, the unemployment rate in Puerto Rico is currently at 46%. Meanwhile, in February 2020, it was 7.8%.

The Dilemma of Combating Hunger in Schools

Along with the tourism shutdown, the governor shut down schools across the island. This placed a burden on impoverished families that depend on the free meals to feed their kids. The governor started reopening the cafeterias in stages to combat hunger in Puerto Rico. However, the reopening process has not been without its hiccups. The Department of Education underdelivered the amount of food necessary in some cities. The cafeterias were only open for two days before over [30 cafeterias shut down](#) after 50 workers tested positive for COVID-19 and 278 employees entered quarantine. After several mothers and nonprofits sued the Department of Education for dodging its responsibility to feed [nearly 300,000 public school students](#), a judge forced Secretary of Education Eligio Hernández to open all the cafeterias at once a month later.

Governmental Assistance

Many impoverished families depend on a combination of wages and food stamps to feed their children. Once many parents lost their jobs, the food stamps were not enough to feed their families. Puerto Rico qualifies for the CARES Act and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA). The CARES Act grants qualifying citizens a \$1,200 stipend and provides funds for hospitals, doctors, laboratories and medical providers. PUA grants unemployment benefits for those who would not normally qualify and grants all unemployment benefits recipients an additional \$600. This would benefit the 300,000 Puerto Ricans that applied for unemployment. While the United States and some of its territories use the Supplemental Nutrition Assistant Program (SNAP), which must serve all eligible people, Puerto Rico uses the Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP), a block grant with a fixed amount of federal funding. Secretary of Treasury Francisco Parés Alicea has stated that those receiving food stamps will be among the last to receive money from the CARES Act and PUA.

Equitable Nutrition Assistance for the Territories Act of 2020

On May 13, 2020, Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Nydia M. Velásquez introduced the [Equitable Nutrition Assistance for the Territories Act of 2020](#) so that Puerto Ricans and inhabitants of other American territories can have equal access to SNAP. When speaking on the act cosponsors, New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said, “this bill should not be controversial or partisan. The richest country in the world should feed its people. These are Americans – and we must stop treating them as second-class citizens.”

World Central Kitchen

Along with the Food Bank of Puerto Rico, Chef José Andrés has been combatting hunger in Puerto Rico. Andrés started the [World Central Kitchen](#), a nonprofit that feeds victims of disasters around the globe. It has provided two million meals in Chef Andrés’ native Spain and 16 million in the U.S. throughout the pandemic. According to Chef Andrés, the nonprofit’s mission is simple: “feed the hungry, bring water to the thirsty.” Andrés was also present in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in 2017. The chef believes that sometimes the simplest solution is the best solution. After the hurricane, there were talks about flying in bread from Florida, but Andrés instead focused on getting generators to local bakeries and having bread available in less than 24 hours.

Even as Puerto Rico is scheduled to reopen its businesses, it is opening with restrictions and with a mandatory curfew in place. This curfew, coupled with people’s hesitancy to travel amidst a pandemic, means that the tourism and nightlife industry that Puerto Rico depends on will not be up and running at full strength for the foreseeable future. This scenario puts millions of Puerto Ricans in a tough situation with those that desperately need assistance placed on the backburner by the government. Thankfully, organizations like World Central Kitchen seek to provide assistance to those in need.

– *Pedro Vega*

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