

LESSON PLAN

LESSON OVERVIEW

In the 1940s and 1950s, migration from Puerto Rico to the U.S. mainland surged as a result of economic changes on the island and increased labor demand in the U.S. during and after World War II. A small though significant population of Puerto Rican migrants, established during the early decades of the twentieth century, swelled from about forty thousand in 1940 to six-hundred thousand by the late 1950s. Because Puerto Ricans had been granted U.S. citizenship in 1917, their move to the mainland was easier than for other groups, but cultural differences still created tension surrounding their influx. Though Puerto Rican migrants were U.S. citizens, they still had to overcome nativism and racial prejudices.

Note: This lesson plan uses the Stanford History Education Group's [Reading Like a Historian Framework](#). This method teaches students how to explore primary source documents and investigate historical questions by employing strategies such as sourcing, contextualizing, corroborating, and close reading. To see this process in action, watch this [video series](#) available on the Teaching Channel.

GRADES

9–12 (This lesson plan can be adapted for middle school with some modifications such as adapting the length of the documents used.)

OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand the challenges and opportunities Puerto Rican migrants found in their new home.
- Students will understand what drew Puerto Rican migrants to the mainland U.S. in the mid-twentieth century and where the majority of them settled.
- Students will consider the role of Puerto Rican migrants in U.S. politics and culture after World War II and the advocacy efforts of Puerto Rican activists.
- Students will be able to analyze primary documents to answer an essential question.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Why did Puerto Rican migration to the United States increase in the mid-twentieth century, and what was life on the U.S. mainland like for Puerto Rican migrants?

LESSON PROCEDURE

1. Warm-up:

The purpose of this section is to engage students in the lesson.

- Project the set of images taken by documentary photographer Jack Delano. Tell students that Jack Delano was one of a group of photographers and writers who were hired to record the effects of poverty and the efforts of the Farm Security Administration, a New Deal agency established during the Great Depression of the 1930s with the purpose of improving the lives of rural farmers. The series of photographs depict some of the living and working conditions of Puerto Ricans in the 1940s.
- Give students time to write down observations.
- Lead a class discussion on students' observations. Explain that the video students are about to watch will explain how living and working conditions were a leading factor in motivating a mass migration of Puerto Ricans to move to the U.S. mainland in the 1940s and 1950s.

2. Video and Discussion of Its Themes:

The purpose of this section is to discuss the events and themes presented in the video.

- Watch the clip from episode 4 of *Latino Americans*: “The New Latinos” (4:35-20:35) and have students complete the video worksheet.
- Once students have completed the worksheet, ask the following questions:
 - What were the major events and who were the major players mentioned in this video? What is their significance?
 - What was the filmmakers’ point of view? How does this point of view affect the presentation of facts, events, and people?

3. Build Background Knowledge:

During the exploration of primary source documents, students will be asked to consider the documents within their original historical context. This section is intended to build background knowledge about the causes of Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. mainland, especially after World War II.

- Key ideas:
 - Puerto Rico is an island located in between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean, about 1,000 miles southeast of Miami, Florida.
 - In 1898, Puerto Rico became a U.S. territory, as a result of the Spanish-American War.
 - In 1917, almost all Puerto Ricans were granted naturalized U.S. citizenship through the Jones-Shafroth Act and were able to move freely between the island and the mainland without a passport.
 - The Great Depression caused the price of sugar (the island’s main crop) to collapse. In the late 1940s through the 1950s, the federal government and Puerto Rican agencies attempted to transform the island’s agricultural economy into one driven by industry and manufacturing. This undertaking, known as Operation Bootstrap (1949–1965), led to economic growth on the island but also high levels of unemployment, a cause for increased Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. mainland. Urban centers like New York and Chicago heavily recruited Puerto Rican laborers, though they earned low wages.
 - Twentieth-century developments in air travel also had a tremendous impact on Puerto Rican migration to the mainland. As the video notes, this was the first airborne mass migration in U.S. history. Hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans came to the U.S. mainland in the years after World War II, with most of them settling in New York City.
 - Although they were U.S. citizens, Puerto Rican migrants faced language barriers and substantial cultural and socioeconomic challenges on the mainland.
 - In 1950, Puerto Rico moved from being a protectorate to a commonwealth, with the U.S. Congress overseeing many basic facets of Puerto Rican government and operations.
 - In 1958, the musical *West Side Story* appeared on Broadway. In 1961, a film version was released, starring Rita Moreno in a role for which she won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. Both were immensely popular and marked the first time Puerto Ricans were the focus of mainstream U.S. theatrical and cinematic productions. However, the film’s representation of Puerto Ricans was simplistic and stereotypical; by the 1960s, *West Side Story* was seen as problematic by increasing numbers of Puerto Ricans.
 - Once on the U.S. mainland, Puerto Rican leaders participated in and encouraged community activism efforts to combat hostility, racism, housing discrimination, and poverty.

4. Exploration of Primary Source Documents:

In this section, students will use a Historical Thinking Chart to explore primary sources relating to the wave of migration from Puerto Rico to the U.S. mainland in the 1940s and 1950s. In preparation, make copies of each of the documents. These may then be posted around the room for a gallery walk, or the teacher can choose to make copies of the documents for all students. The Historical Thinking Chart is set up so that the teacher can decide which documents to present to the students (the main consideration being the amount of time the teacher can dedicate to the activity). The exploration can also be modified by telling students that they must explore a set number of documents within the time allotted.

- Pass out the blank Historical Thinking Chart.
 - If necessary, introduce students to the terms **sourcing**, **contextualization**, **corroboration**, and **close reading** as steps historians take to paint a full picture of any historical event and be critical consumers of information.
- If doing a gallery walk, bring students' attention to the posted documents and explain that they will circulate around the room reading the documents and filling out the notes template for each one. Give students at least thirty minutes to rotate around the room.
- Alternately, the teacher may give students copies of all the selected documents to work on individually or in small groups.
- Optional: Have students complete a Primary Source Worksheet for each corresponding document.

5. Discussing the Documents:

The purpose of this section is to explore the events and themes more deeply.

- Bring the class back together. If students were not able to see all of the documents in the time allotted, you may want to give them a few minutes to share notes with other students who were able to see documents they did not get a chance to view.
- Lead a discussion that helps students connect these documents to the essential question:
Why did Puerto Rican migration to the mainland increase in the mid-twentieth century, and what impact did those migrants have on the development of U.S. politics and culture after World War II?

6. Closing:

The purpose of this section is to give students a chance to synthesize their thoughts independently in writing.

- Give students the following writing prompt:
Why did Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. mainland increase in the mid-twentieth century, and what was life there like for Puerto Rican migrants? Use primary and secondary source documents from the time period to support your answer.
- Give students time to compose their paragraphs.

WARM-UP WORKSHEET



Family living in a slum area in Yauco, Puerto Rico, 1942. Photo by Jack Delano. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

LATINO AMERICANS

500 YEARS OF HISTORY

PUERTO RICAN MIGRATION



Utado, Puerto Rico. Children in the slum area, 1942. Photo by Jack Delano. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

For related educational resources, visit www.humanitiestexas.org/education/latinoamericans

LATINO AMERICANS

500 YEARS OF HISTORY

PUERTO RICAN MIGRATION



A street in the slum area of the hill town of Lares, Puerto Rico, 1942. Photo by Jack Delano. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



Cultivating tobacco in a field near Barranquitas, Puerto Rico, 1941. Photo by Jack Delano. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

LATINO AMERICANS

500 YEARS OF HISTORY

PUERTO RICAN MIGRATION



Ponce (vicinity), Puerto Rico. Sugar worker taking a drink of water on a plantation, 1938. Photo by Jack Delano. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

For related educational resources, visit www.humanitiestexas.org/education/latinoamericans

VIDEO WORKSHEET

DIRECTIONS

Answer the following questions using the information provided in the episode.

1. Why did many Puerto Ricans leave the island in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s?
2. What was Operation Bootstrap?
3. How many Puerto Ricans would have to leave the island in order for Operation Bootstrap to succeed?
4. How did having U.S. citizenship make the Puerto Rican experience different from that of other immigrants?
5. How large was the Puerto Rican population in New York City by 1952?

PRIMARY SOURCE WORKSHEET

CARLOS RAQUEL RIVERA, *HIGH TIDE/MAREA ALTA*, 1954

Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte, Universidad de Puerto Rico



PRIMARY SOURCE WORKSHEET

PUERTO RICAN WOMAN CARRIES A YOUNG BOY WHILE WAITING TO BOARD AN AIRPLANE FROM SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO, TO NEW YORK, NY, 1946

Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY



PRIMARY SOURCE WORKSHEET

“PUERTO RICAN MIGRANTS JAM NEW YORK,” *LIFE* MAGAZINE, AUGUST 25, 1947, VOL. 23, NO. 8
LIFE Magazine

As he stands at the airport in his Sunday suit and takes his first bewildered look at America, the Puerto Rican . . . is the envy of his countrymen. He has just arrived in the promised land, where he will join thousands of others who have taken the northbound journey ahead of him. He is part of a mass migration which since the end of the war has added a possible 50,000 Puerto Ricans to the population of New York’s swarming East Side. This month the migration is at a flood tide of almost 1,000 a week.

Puerto Ricans are leaving their Caribbean island for a single compelling reason. If they stay there, they face unemployment, disease and semi-starvation. Generations of ruthless exploitation of the land for the sake of one crop, sugar, have reduced Puerto Rican economy to beggary. This has been foreseen for a long time. Four years ago a Senate investigating committee returned from the island with the verdict that its problems were almost “unsolvable.” But almost nothing has been done to aid Puerto Ricans, who are as much American citizens as the residents of Hawaii or Alaska.

Many of the Puerto Ricans now pouring into New York City are illiterate. Many speak no English. All of them are desperately poor. Almost without exception these newcomers squeeze into East Harlem, complicating an already critical housing and relief situation. Puerto Rican and New York authorities are belatedly—and so far ineffectually—looking for a solution. One man who is not worrying is East Harlem’s pro-Communist Representative Vito Marcantonio. To the Puerto Ricans he is a fountainhead of advice and help. Day and night they crowd into Marcantonio’s “clubhouse” on 116th Street for assistance in their financial, family or civil troubles. They ask his aid in dealing with the welfare workers who issue relief checks. They seek his help in arranging passage for relatives, left behind in Puerto Rico, who would also like to come to New York. After a year of receiving this patronage in the 18th District, however, they may, if they wish, return Vito Marcantonio’s favors. They can vote.

. . .

Most Puerto Ricans come to the U.S. in the stifling, cramped cabins of ex-Army C-47s. . . .

When they reach New York, proudly wearing their best clothes, most Puerto Ricans are penniless and already homesick. But in Spanish Harlem, where 200,000 of their people are now established, they can find stores where their own language is spoken and an atmosphere that reeks of home. Because they have no money, many Puerto Ricans soon turn to welfare offices, where as American citizens they are entitled to such support as the city’s home-relief funds can afford. . . .

QUESTIONS

1. According to the *LIFE* magazine article, why are Puerto Ricans leaving the island in such large numbers?
2. According to *LIFE*, what experiences are shared by those who are newly arrived in New York City?
3. Based on what you have read in the article, who do you imagine the writer and reader(s) to be? Why is that significant?
4. Is this a purely informational article? Do you detect any kind of bias? If so, where? Provide specific examples from the text.

PRIMARY SOURCE WORKSHEET

JOSÉ "CHEO" CÓRTEZ, ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW BY EUGENE RIVERA, JUNE 1984

Major Problems in Mexican American History

I lived in Barceloneta, Puerto Rico, one of the smallest towns in Puerto Rico. I used to work in the sugar cane fields for three months each year and for nine months: nothing. I did nothing. I earned 75 cents a day. I remember that after the *zafra*¹ there was no work for nine months. If when we were working things were bad, they were worse during those times. We would only eat one meal a day. During the war, things were bad. We would not drink coffee with sugar because, although there was sugar, we did not have the money to buy it. Everything was rationed; even the rice was rationed. There were times when one had a little money and would go to the store and could not buy anything. We would only eat corn meal and fish. We had no equipment. We had no shoes. We had no clothes. We had nothing. . . . My *compadre* told me that Friedman² was bringing people to Ohio. I applied and got the money and went to the office at Fernandez Juncos Avenue. I bought a ticket to migrate. We owed \$25 upon arrival in Lorain. We had to agree to pay Friedman from our first paycheck. I arrived in November 1948, Thanksgiving Day.

. . .

We left from Isla Grande Airport in San Juan. The airplane seemed in good condition with regard to the engine and equipment but inside it was in critical condition. It was very dirty. We were up to our knees in garbage. It was used to transport Jersey cows. There was a fence in the middle; they placed cows on one side and bulls on the other. . . . When we arrived in Miami, they told us that we would be leaving shortly. The airplane had engine problems. At eight o'clock, they took us to a waiting room where we spent three days. We asked for help because we had no money and they gave ninety-some dollars for the group. . . . The only thing we ate during those three days was coffee and donuts because that is all we knew in English. They kept testing the airplane on the runway. Finally, they put us on another one.

. . .

When I arrived [at the National Tube Company] there were 435 Puerto Ricans. I lived in barrack D, D-15. The only barracks with Americans was barrack A, the others were full of Puerto Ricans. We had no place to go so we would buy food from La Italiana [Grocery Store] and cook it in the barracks. . . . Since Friedman only brought hard workers here, the majority of the time we worked.

¹ *Zafra*: the time of the sugar cane harvest in Caribbean countries, usually in late summer or early fall.

² "Friedman" refers to the S.G. Friedman Labor Agency, which oversaw the migration of close to one thousand Puerto Rican men and their families to Lorain, Ohio. There, most Latinos worked in the steel industry.

PRIMARY SOURCE WORKSHEET

PUERTO RICAN ACTIVIST, ANTONIA PANTOJA, ON THE FOUNDING OF ASPIRA, 1961

Excerpt from *Memoir of a Visionary: Antonia Pantoja* by Antonia Pantoja, 2002. Courtesy of Arte Público Press, University of Houston

Antonio Pantoja (1922-2002) was a civil rights leader and founder of the educational leadership organization ASPIRA. Born in Puerto Rico, Pantoja worked as a schoolteacher before emigrating to the U.S. mainland. She worked as a welder in a wartime factory in New York and then became a social worker and community activist. She co-founded the Hispanic American Youth Association in 1953, which later became the Puerto Rican Association for Community Affairs (PRACA) and founded the National Puerto Rican Forum in 1957. In 1961, Pantoja founded ASPIRA, a nonprofit organization that provides educational assistance to Latino American youth and served as its first president until 1966. Pantoja received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1996.

If you asked me, “What was the most important and impacting work that you have ever done?” I would reply, “The founding of ASPIRA.” ASPIRA occupies a very special place in my heart.

...

This time period actually spans over seven years, ending in 1961. . . . The original idea that I presented to Dr. [Frank] Horne ¹was called “New Leaders in New York.” It was to organize youths into clubs that would become the vehicles to encourage them to find their identity, learn leadership skills by working on problems that their communities suffered, complete high school, and enter college to pursue a career that would allow them to give back to their community. The idea had germinated in my mind as a result of various experiences that I had when I arrived in New York. The idea began to haunt my thoughts after having heard discussions from Puerto Rican high school students who attended the youth conferences that PRACA [Puerto Rican Association for Community Affairs] was holding. These conferences were organized and held by the youths themselves, who were the leaders and speakers telling us how powerless and insignificant they were made to feel by their classmates and teachers. The students discussed their fear of speaking in their classes, their shame because of their native language, their fear of the gangs from other ethnic groups, and their fear of the police. I was deeply concerned about what I was hearing.

¹ Dr. Frank Horne was an African American writer and activist who worked to eliminate racial discrimination in public and private housing. Horne held a number of government appointments, including serving as the Director of the Office of Race Relations in Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s administration and after in the U.S. Housing Authority until 1955. He became the Executive Director for the New York City Commission on Intergroup Relations which advanced the nation’s first laws against discrimination in public housing. Horne also led the Open City Housing Project to promote racially integrated neighborhoods.

Pantoja served on the Commission on Intergroup Relations, a city agency led by Horne and designed to include and address the challenges experienced by major racial and ethnic communities in New York.

The implementation of my ideas would not come easily. I had to pursue many different persons and approaches before I could succeed.

...

My idea was to . . . provide a way for their “hanging out together” (the clubs), following a behavior that was natural to their age group. In the clubs, they would learn about their culture and the country of their parents, and also learn how to survive in the school and the neighborhood. The club would provide opportunities to develop feelings of self-worth and appreciation for their culture as they learned leadership skills to work in their communities. The clubs would substitute for the gangs that were already becoming popular protective groups for Italian, Polish, and black youths.

...

We needed to design ways to attack the root causes of these myriad fires and begin to develop in the community other people who would join the battle at different points in the problems. The approach I prepared suggested two roads: the immediate help brought by youth clubs that could engage in giving attention to selected problems; and the longer road that would develop educated leaders committed to the resolution of the problems at policy levels, in the political and economic spheres of the total society.

...

After months of work, our group had prepared a philosophy, a mission, objectives, and a work plan. Everyone agreed that this new leadership program should not become a service agency; instead, in form and methods, it should be a movement. However, we all were wise enough to understand that it had to render some service if it was to be successful in raising funds.

The very important act of naming the project engaged the group in discussions that clearly indicated a philosophical position and a profound understanding that to work with youth we had to impart values, optimism, and the decision to succeed. We wanted an upbeat name, one word to express belief in one’s self. The word *aspira* was finally selected. It was chosen because to aspire is upbeat. We all wished the meaning would be “I will aspire and I will attain.” The Spanish command form ASPIRA, of the verb *aspirar*, was perfect.

We made fast progress in organizing ASPIRA. . . . In the autumn of 1961, we received letters from the five foundations accepting our proposals and assigning funds. The Forum board called a meeting.... [T]hey all concluded that I should resign my position with the city of New York to come and direct ASPIRA.

...

The club programs grew to be very impressive in membership size, number, and impact. The ASPIRA Club Federation became a very powerful organization with very successful programs.... The important fact about the model of the work in clubs was that it was invented by the youth.

...

The reader will understand why ASPIRA became the most important work of my life. In terms of numbers, ASPIRA of New York alone, from 1963, to 1999, can easily be shown to have touched the lives of approximately 36,000 young people from Puerto Rican and other Latino groups.

...

Today, there are seven ASPIRAs: in Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Florida, and Puerto Rico. They are served by a national office in Washington, D.C.

QUESTIONS

1. What motivated Antonia Pantoja to start ASPIRA?

2. What was the purpose of ASPIRA?

3. From where did ASPIRA take its name?

PRIMARY SOURCE WORKSHEET

AL RAVENNA, PUERTO RICANS DEMONSTRATE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AT CITY HALL, NEW YORK CITY, 1967

New York World-Telegram and The Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division,
Library of Congress

An emphasis on education was at the center of Puerto Rican civil rights campaigns going back to the 1930s. In the 1960s, Puerto Rican and African American civil rights activists worked together to advocate for equality in education, with parents and community leaders joining the effort. In the most well-known example, in February 1964, a large-scale boycott, involving roughly 350,000 students and teachers, took place in New York City to protest officials' not meeting the needs of students in impoverished neighborhoods. The messages and aims of the 1964 strike are very similar to those presented by the demonstrators in this photograph from 1967.



CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES, ASSIGNMENTS, AND FURTHER RESOURCES

CURATE A MUSEUM EXHIBITION

Gather images and documents that indicate the barriers faced by Puerto Ricans living on the island and by those who immigrated to the mainland. Compare and contrast the struggles of the two groups.

Students may present their exhibitions as PowerPoint presentations or print images to create physical exhibitions.

ASSIGNMENT PROMPTS

- Research Operation Bootstrap in depth and in the context of Puerto Rico’s historical relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico. For more information on Operation Bootstrap, begin with [this website](#) from Lehman College at the City University of New York (CUNY). Write a brief essay examining the consequences of this initiative.
- How were Puerto Rican youth portrayed in U.S. mainstream media in the decades following World War II? Using newspaper articles related to *West Side Story* and a perceived rise in gang culture, write a brief essay considering the film’s representation of Latino Americans compared to its portrayal of White teenagers.
- After watching multiple clips from *West Side Story*, examine Rita Moreno’s portrayal of Anita. Write a brief essay identifying and evaluating some of the more significant aspects of her performance and/or the film’s representation of Latino Americans.
- Introduce students to the Nuyorican Movement and its major practitioners. Write a brief essay that compares how one Nuyorican writer or artist represents Puerto Rican people and culture to how a mainstream production like *West Side Story* represents Puerto Rican people and culture.