U.S. COLONIALISM in Puerto Rico created an economic space in the territory that allowed U.S. corporations to exploit Puerto Ricans as cheap labor beginning in 1898. The economic, social, and political changes that emerged after the 1940s did not change this situation. Under Operation Bootstrap, the Puerto Rican government gave subsidies to U.S. corporations that included local tax exemption and a vast source of cheap labor that was not fully protected by U.S. labor laws. One of the areas of autonomy of the reconstituted colonial state under the Commonwealth status was its continued exclusion from specific federal laws approved by Congress, like minimum wage and environmental protection.

Puerto Ricans also became a significant source of cheap labor in the United States after 1945. They were regarded as such from the time they began to move to the United States. What was qualitatively and quantitatively new was the massive number of Puerto Ricans leaving the island after World War II. For over a decade, tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans moved to the United States, most of them on their own, to areas of the American Northeast. They worked mostly in low-paying jobs in labor-intensive manufacturing industries, in the service industry, and in agriculture. Thousands more left the island every year as farmworkers under contract, in expeditions organized and managed by the Puerto Rican government. They were considered migrant
workers, as part of that army of exploited farmworkers moving from one place to another in search of agricultural work in the U.S. mainland.

One consequence of the Michigan expedition was the insertion of Puerto Rican farmworkers into the debate regarding the status of migratory labor in the United States at the end of the 1940s. As migratory labor, they joined large numbers of domestic workers, largely African Americans and Chicanos, and of alien laborers who worked in U.S. agriculture, mostly Mexicans—both legal braceros and undocumented immigrants—and West Indians. Reflecting the status of their homeland, Puerto Rican farmworkers occupied a liminal position within the structure of U.S. migratory labor: they were not deemed domestic labor by the U.S. government and employers but neither were they completely alien, given their citizenship. They enjoyed the protection of a government-sponsored contract, like Mexican and West Indian alien labor, but they could not be deported, like domestic labor.

In the first section of this final chapter, I use the report by President Truman’s Commission on Migratory Labor to examine the status of Puerto Rican farmworkers as migrant labor in the United States and the working of the Puerto Rican government as a labor contractor: an intermediary between Puerto Rican farmworkers and U.S. agricultural interests. The Puerto Rican government became a provider of reliable cheap labor to American agricultural employers. This is an important reason why Puerto Rican farmworkers were hired in American agriculture for decades.

The last two sections discuss the specific workings of the Farm Placement Program (FPP) and the Migration Division in the United States. The FPP is the clearest example of an organized migration program by the Puerto Rican government and reflects its role as a labor provider to American agricultural interests. Once Puerto Rican migrants moved to the United States, the Migration Division would provide information on jobs and social services to facilitate their incorporation in American society. Furthermore, through its employment program, the Migration Division also functioned as a labor provider of unskilled labor to low-paying manufacturing industries in the United States.

THE PRESIDENT’S COMMISSION ON MIGRANT LABOR: PUERTO RICANS AS MIGRATORY WORKERS

The director of the Bureau of Employment and Migration (BEM), Petroamérica Pagán de Colón, stated in a report to Governor Muñoz Marín in Decem-
ber 1949, “Our workers have joined the group of migratory workers in the United States and they move from region to region where there are job opportunities.” By 1950, particularly after the incidents in the sugar beet fields of Michigan, Puerto Rican farmworkers became part of the United States’ debate on migrant labor. In June 1950, President Truman appointed a presidential commission to study the situation of migratory workers in the United States. The plight of Puerto Rican migrant workers figured prominently in the hearings held by the presidential commission.

According to Kirsten, the commission “represented a noble but futile effort on the part of the Truman administration to bridge the difference between organized labor and agribusiness over immigration policy and to rationalize the use of alien labor.” A major concern that led to the creation of this commission was the issue of Mexican labor, both legal braceros and undocumented immigrants. Representatives of labor argued that Mexican workers, both bracero and undocumented, were displacing American workers; they stressed that agricultural interests preferred undocumented workers, who were more easily exploited and subject to deportation after their work contract ended. Agricultural interests contended that the continued need for alien labor resulted from a lack of interest by American workers in performing agricultural work. Representatives of American labor reasoned that domestic labor would carry out farmwork if wages and working conditions improved. After the NAACP and other African American and Hispanic organizations complained that the conditions of domestic labor were not included in the commission’s proposed agenda, Truman ordered the commission to study the labor conditions of this group as well. Nevertheless, Truman did not appoint any African American or Hispanic representatives to the commission.

Hearings by the president’s Commission on Migratory Labor were held in Trenton, New Jersey, and the situation of Puerto Rican migrants workers there figured prominently in those proceedings. Asked if all Puerto Ricans went back to the island after finishing their contract, John G. Sholl, from the New Jersey migrant labor bureau, answered that some went to New York in the first year, and added: “New Jersey has not had a single case of relief for Puerto Ricans, however. Most of them go back to their home island with a good roll of bills in their pockets.” He stated that farmers were satisfied with their work. New Jersey’s secretary of agriculture also praised Puerto Rican workers, saying that farmers generally preferred them because they were “good workers, came from rural areas, were well behaved and single.”

The last round of hearings by the commission was held in Saginaw, Michigan, in the heart of Congressman Crawford’s district. There, too, the plight of Puerto Rican workers in that state would play an important part in the
hearings. Crawford argued that the hearings, scheduled to start a day before primary elections, were aimed at hurting him politically—that unions trying to organize agricultural workers were behind the commission’s hearings in an attempt to harm agricultural interests and him in particular. He criticized Sierra Berdecía for playing into the hands of union interests by criticizing sugar beet farmers in his report on Puerto Rican workers in Michigan. Crawford maintained that even if it hurt him politically in Michigan, he would still defend the right of Puerto Ricans to work in the Michigan fields. Muñoz Marín had to intervene to indicate that the Puerto Rican government still considered Crawford a friend of the island and had no political agenda against the Michigan congressman. The Puerto Rican government was trying hard to maintain Crawford’s crucial support for its agenda of political reforms in Congress. Crawford won the primary and the right to represent his Michigan district once again.

The first person to testify in the Saginaw hearings was precisely Crawford. He stated that Puerto Rico’s “fantastic overpopulation” required an extensive plan of migration of at least twenty-five thousand per year. According to Crawford, the American government had two options: “Either we let them work or we send them financial aid. If we cannot provide them with opportunities for work they will disintegrate at the expense of the American taxpayer.” Also testifying that day was MFC’s Henderson, who declared that enforcing federal regulations would have ruinous consequences on Michigan’s sugar beet industry. In his statement, Henderson elaborated on the disastrous situation experienced by Michigan sugar beet farmers with Puerto Rican farmworkers in the 1950 season, claiming that difficulties with these workers arose from several misunderstandings regarding working conditions and pay. He basically blamed the Puerto Rican government, arguing that “a very poor job of briefing the men in Puerto Rico was done with the result that the men did not understand the terms and conditions of work properly and many of them came under the impression they were working on an hour basis” instead of being paid by piecework. He found fault with their living conditions in the fact the “these men being without the women” were not able to do their cooking and cleaning and “soon found themselves living in filth.” Henderson stated that MFC would still hire a small number of Puerto Ricans in the future, but under a “special system of supervision, housing, feeding, and payment.” The MFC representative argued that until sugar beet production was fully mechanized, a foreign labor program would still be required in the industry.

The panorama presented by several Puerto Ricans who had worked in the Michigan sugar beet farms in the 1950 season was vastly different from that portrayed by Crawford and Henderson. Santos Cintrón, who left a wife and
seven children in Puerto Rico to go to work there in June, testified that after eight weeks of work, the Michigan Sugar Company contended that he owed them $9.69 for deductions of food, housing, and transportation. Cintrón left the Michigan farms and moved to Detroit, where he made $75 a week working in a steel plant and was able to send $45 a week to his family back home. A similar story was told by Martín González, who had survived the June Westair crash and, like Cintrón, had abandoned the sugar beet field for a steel plant in Detroit. Father Clement Kern, of the Holy Trinity Church in Detroit, gave testimony of similar stories from the more than one hundred Puerto Ricans who had gone to this parish seeking aid and shelter. He testified about pay statements of $10, $13, and $16 for a period of four weeks’ work. A spokesman for the Michigan sugar beet industry told the commission that the workers’ working and living conditions could not be improved “until we prove that the sugar beet industry is profitable.” The deputy commissioner of Michigan’s Department of Labor testified that the farmers had the resources to pay the workers fair salaries and provide them with decent living conditions.

After several days of hearings before the presidential commission, it was evident that Puerto Rican workers in Michigan were mistreated and deceived. Representatives of social service agencies in Saginaw explained how the workers were misled and not properly advised in terms of the working and living conditions and wages to be expected in Michigan. A representative of Michigan’s Labor Department argued for stricter federal regulations on migratory farm labor, particularly on the sugar beet industry. There were no complaints against Puerto Rican workers from the community or agricultural representatives.

The commission’s report to the president was made public on April 7, 1951. It presented a strong condemnation of the appalling working and living conditions of migratory workers in the United States. The report remains the best document on the working and living conditions of this group of workers in American agriculture at this time of history. Nevertheless, none of the main recommendations presented by the commission—like giving domestic labor priority over foreign labor in agricultural jobs—were implemented. In fact, a year after the report was made public, Congress approved Public Law 78, extending the Bracero Program, in blatant contradiction to a major recommendation by the commission.

The report established that what made a person a migratory worker was not the kind of work he did but “whether he maintains a stable home the year round.” Other areas of the economy depended on seasonal work, but “it is only in agriculture that migratory labor has become a problem of such proportions and complexity” as to require government intervention and study.
The single most important reason for workers to become migrant laborers “is that many people find it impossible to make a living in a single location and hence have had to become migratory” (5). By 1950, migratory labor represented almost one-fourth of the agricultural labor in the United States. Of the close to one million migratory workers, half were domestic workers and the other half were foreign workers, most of them Mexicans, with a smaller number of West Indians and Puerto Ricans (3, 6).

The report characterized migrant workers as “children of misfortune,” be it in the United States or in foreign lands: “They are the rejects of those sectors of agriculture and of other industries undergoing change.” Domestic and foreign migratory workers shared many experiences of work and exploitation; they moved through the nation in search of work, “but they neither belong to the land nor does the land belong to them.” Both were marginal and excluded in the nation and in the communities they worked for. The differences between domestic and foreign migratory workers in the terms of economic and social status and job security were none: “Under the law, the domestic migrants are citizens of the United States but they are scarcely more a part of the land of their birth than the alien migrants working beside them.” They worked everywhere but belonged nowhere. Communities wanted their labor, yet declined “to accept them as full members of the community.” Although migratory workers worked in the same places, doing similar jobs, they did not join forces in defending their common interests (3). Not only citizenship status divided them, but race and ethnicity, too.

One characteristic element faced by all migratory workers was that their work was seasonal, and they worked for specific periods of time, sometimes very short, at the whims of the employers. Farm employers want a labor supply . . . ready and willing to meet the short-term work requirements and which, on the other hand, will not impose social and economic problems on them or on their communities when the work is finished. . . . The demand for migratory workers is thus essentially twofold: To be ready to go to work when needed; to be gone when not needed.

To avoid the problems related to family migrants, “many farm employers prefer alien labor” (16). Wages for migratory workers were very low, particularly compared to manufacturing jobs; in 1949 the average earning for farmwork was $5 per day, with a yearly income of $514. Migratory workers worked an average of 101 days per year (70 days of farmwork and 31 days of nonfarm-work) (125, 128). Harsh treatment, low wages, and no job security explained why very few farmworkers returned the next year to their previous employer.
Migratory workers enjoyed almost none of the social protections extended to industrial workers, like unemployment benefits, social security, disability insurance, sickness pay, or minimum wage protection (17–19).

Migratory laborers worked mostly in cotton, fruits, vegetables, and sugar beets. Although they provided only 3 to 4 percent of the American agricultural output, their labor was significant at the critical periods of crop production. Migratory farmworkers were employed in a small number of large and highly specialized farms that employed a great quantity of labor. The approximately 125,000 such farms represented 2 percent of all American farms, and their crop production constituted 7 percent of all farm products. These laborers proliferated in those crops less amenable to mechanization. After the end of the war, increased agricultural production did not imply more jobs, as mechanization extended throughout. By 1949, only 40 percent of all farmworkers could get eight or more months of work per year (7–10). The commission’s report questioned the contradictory nature of U.S. policy on alien labor. Most alien labor was used in large-scale farms that represented only 2 percent of all of the nation’s farm units. The use of cheap alien labor gave these large farms, owned by big agricultural companies or corporations, a competitive advantage over smaller, family-owned farms (22).

Although North American migratory workers and alien labor in agriculture faced similar working and living conditions, they experienced different situations that were defined by their citizenship status. Ironically, alien labor enjoyed more government-provided protections than did American farmworkers:

Domestic migratory farm workers not only have no protection through collective bargaining but employers as a rule refuse to give them the guarantees they extend to alien contract workers whom they import. These include guarantees of employment, workmen’s compensation, medical care, standards of sanitation, and payment of the cost of transportation.

Like the Mexican bracero and the West Indian laborer, the Puerto Rican farmworker enjoyed a contract and the protection and representation of his government. Domestic farmworkers, nevertheless, “have one security which alien contract labor does not have: Whether they quit or are discharged, they cannot be deported” (5). Although considered in most ways as alien labor, Puerto Ricans enjoyed one right in common with other domestic workers: as U.S. citizens, they could not be deported. Puerto Rican farmworkers were, in a sense, in a more advantageous position than alien and domestic migratory workers.
Puerto Ricans occupied a peculiar position within the structure of the U.S. migratory labor system: like the status of their island or their citizenship, they moved within the borders of the domestic and the foreign in the American polity. Even though they were U.S. citizens, their status had many similarities with that of foreign labor; however, even though they were considered by many as alien labor, they enjoyed rights of citizenship. Unlike the domestic migrant labor force, Puerto Ricans were protected by their government, like Mexicans and West Indians—that is, like foreign labor. But like domestic workers, they could move within the borders of the nation without fear of deportation. Although they were not usually considered part of the domestic supply of labor, they were not seen as alien labor, either. When the president’s Commission on Migratory Labor reported in its main conclusion that the United States should decrease its dependence on alien labor for agriculture and create more jobs opportunities for its workers, it also recommended: “To meet any supplemental needs for agricultural labor that may develop, preference [should] be given to citizens of the offshore possessions of the United States, such as Hawaii and Puerto Rico” (36). That is, when the need arises, these particular U.S. citizens should receive preference over alien workers.

One important conclusion that comes from reading the report by the president’s Commission on Migratory Labor is the extensive and significant role that governments played in providing alien labor to American agriculture. As the report concluded, during and after World War II, “government was the labor contractor.” The report is referring here to the U.S. government, but the same could have been said of the foreign governments that were supplying labor to American agriculture, like Mexico, the Bahamas, and Jamaica. The same can also have been said of Puerto Rico, which, although technically not a foreign government, is treated as such throughout the report. In all of these cases, these governments were functioning as a labor contractor, that is, as intermediary agents regulating and organizing the movement of labor from their territories to the United States in order to provide labor to agricultural employers. There is a difference, though, in the procedure to implement this movement of labor between the Mexican experience and the West Indian and Puerto Rican ones. In the case of the Bracero Program, the governments of Mexico and the United States entered into an agreement that was later accepted by the workers and the employer. In this agreement, employers paid transportation costs, and there was no penalty for the workers if they aban-
doned work. In the West Indian and Puerto Rican cases, agricultural employers came to an agreement directly with these governments, which provided a contract stipulating the working conditions and responsibilities for both the employers and employees. Recruitment was mostly carried out by the government, and transportation was organized by the employer but paid for by the worker. The agreement allowed the employer to make deductions from the worker’s pay to cover transportation costs, meals, and housing, as well as any other expenses included in the agreement. There was no mechanism established to settle disputes related to working and living conditions, as existed in the Mexican agreement. Work desertion in the West Indian case—as it would be in the Puerto Rican experience—was lesser than in the Mexican program due to the “vulnerability of the British West Indian workers to financial discipline, as provided in their agreements” (48). The report made clear the difference between the Mexican agreement and the West Indian and Puerto Rican ones:

Mexico is the only country which requires an intergovernmental agreement; by coincidence, Mexico is the country which is ostensibly least interested in having its nationals do farm work in the United States. The greater concern of the British West Indies and of Puerto Rico to allow their people to enter into farm employment is reflected in the terms of their agreements, all of which are somewhat less costly to employers in one respect or another than is the Mexican agreement. (51)

Puerto Rican policy makers—from Muñoz Marín down—asserted throughout many decades that it was the government-approved contract and thus their government’s protection that differentiated island farmworkers from other domestic workers in the United States. They claimed that the Puerto Rican government had to fight farm employers to get them to accept the contract and thus provide some basic protections and benefits for island migrant workers. But contrary to what these government functionaries argued, it was precisely because these workers had a contract that they were employed in the United States.

This discussion leads us to important questions: Why were Puerto Ricans hired to do farmwork in the United States? What was their comparative advantage over other alien workers or other domestic workers? The contract might be a reason: although it offered some important protections for Puerto Rican workers that other domestic workers did not enjoy, it also provided certain benefits to employers that made these workers attractive for hiring. To agricultural employers, dealing directly with the Puerto Rican government as a
provider of labor guaranteed a reliable and safe source of labor when needed. And unlike agreements with contract alien labor, dealing with the Puerto Rican government, an authority from a U.S. territory, avoided all the bureaucratic entanglements of diplomatic understandings with foreign nations like Mexico, the Bahamas, or Jamaica. The Puerto Rican government provided a reliable labor force since it did all the screening and selection before signing the workers into a contract and did its best to ensure that the workers would return to the island. Through its migration agencies in Puerto Rico and the United States, the Puerto Rican government encouraged its workers to comply with their contract and return home and never to disturb the communities where they worked. Even when these workers did not return home, which was often, they would move to cities far away from the communities where they had been working, and once they were there, the Puerto Rican government would do its best through its Migration Division offices to find them work and help in their incorporation into American society. One stipulation that benefited employers in the labor contract provided by the Puerto Rican government was the so-called prevailing wage agreement. Puerto Rican functionaries boasted that their contract guaranteed Puerto Rican workers the same wages earned by other domestic workers and that island labor did not lower wages in the areas where they worked. Nonetheless, the prevailing wage was not set by the federal government nor by collective negotiations, but by the farmers themselves before the beginning of each season. The presidential commission’s report characterized the prevailing wage as “worse than meaningless.” It argued that a wage that was set by the employer with “no regard to whether it is a sufficient wage to attract workers” has no value in determining the price of labor in this area. It continued: “This is especially true when contract foreign workers are brought in at the arbitrary wage rate which then inevitably tends to set the pattern of wages in the locality.” That is, the prevailing wage was used by employers to keep wages below their true value in the labor market. As a consequence, the prevailing wage standard set in the contracts with foreign labor, including Puerto Rico, was used to depress wages for domestic farmworkers. Contrary to the prevailing wage standard in industrial employment, there was no collective bargaining in agriculture setting the price of labor. As a consequence of this mechanism, domestic labor was not attracted to agricultural work, and thus an artificial scarcity of labor would require the importation of foreign labor (59–61).

The hiring of Puerto Rican workers was possible only after USES had established a shortage of domestic workers for the industry and allowed the importation of foreign workers to satisfy that demand. But the presumed labor shortage existed because the prevailing wage rate was insufficient to attract
domestic workers. Domestic workers also faced another disadvantage with regard to alien and Puerto Rican workers since they had no contract that provided certain benefits and protections. Thus, the Puerto Rican government reproduced and benefitted from a system that kept wages depressed for domestic workers and allowed the employment of Puerto Rican farmworkers in the United States for wages that were lower than what the market would establish. That is, Puerto Ricans were employed in agriculture because their labor was cheaper than the available domestic labor supply.

But would not the other workers’ benefits of the Puerto Rican labor contract increase the price of their labor with respect to domestic workers? Indeed, but the contract also offered another element that was beneficial to employers: the Puerto Rican government as a labor contractor. By accepting the contract, the Puerto Rican government guaranteed employers an organized and reliable source of labor, something that domestic migratory labor could not offer. Although USES determined labor shortages and the areas in need of labor, it did not organize the movement of labor from one region to the other; in fact, the commission’s report was highly critical of the agency in this regard.¹⁴ Migrant workers had to move on their own, often with families, or get work through the use of private labor contractors. The latter served as intermediaries between the workers and the employers. As the report stated: “The labor contractor system is essentially a means by which the employer of migratory farm workers avoids the responsibilities of obtaining and managing his labor” (91). But the use of private labor contractors was often problematic for employers. Although employers would have little contact with the workers, the workers would often have conflicting relationships with contractors. Many contractors would steal from the workers’ pay, charge exorbitant fees for finding employment, and mislead them regarding their working and living conditions; more often than not, they would leave the farm after delivering the workers. The first expeditions of Puerto Rican farmworkers after the end of the war were organized by private contractors; the host of problems these created for workers and local communities was one of the given reasons for the government’s intervention in the migration of farmworkers.

According to the commission’s report, worker desertion in farms using labor contractors was high, and workers would not return the next year to work in the same place, forcing employers to devote time and resources every year to the process of contracting of workers. The use of labor contractors was not the most efficient means of getting labor. On the other hand, “when the employment occurs under the contractual relationship which legal aliens and Puerto Ricans have, there is no occasion for the labor contractor or the crew leader to introduce himself as an employment intermediary.” Although
“foreign and Puerto Rican work contracts” provided workers with guaranteed wages and terms of employment that could increase labor costs for the employer, they also provided “stability in the employer-employee relationship” (105). The contract and the intervention of governments provided alien and Puerto Rican contract labor with a means to deal with grievances, contrary to what “the typical domestic migrant has, which is to move on to something else, if he feels he has been treated unjustly” (106).

Another major advantage of alien and Puerto Rican contract labor was that their governments could guarantee large numbers of workers to associations of agricultural employers, something that individual migrant workers or even private labor contractors could not do. By the early 1950s, the Puerto Rican government was dealing almost exclusively with farmers’ associations like the Michigan Fields Corp., the Garden State Service Cooperative Association, the Glassboro Service Association in New Jersey, and the Minnesota Canners Association. These were four of the best examples of agricultural associations mentioned in the commission’s report, and all four hired labor from Puerto Rico. Encouraged by the U.S. government, these associations proliferated during World War II as a mechanism to provide labor to American agriculture. They allowed farmers and companies to pool their resources to hire large numbers of workers and guaranteed that they could fulfill the requirements of the labor contracts. The Puerto Rican government would provide many workers, but only to these associations. These associations allowed individual farmers to have access to a secure source of Puerto Rican workers through the pooling of labor, that is, sharing workers throughout a season in order to guarantee the minimum number of working hours required by the Puerto Rican contract (160 hours for a four-week period). Organizing the pooling of labor on such a scale with domestic migrant workers was much more time-consuming and costly for farm employers. Furthermore, the Puerto Rican government implemented a very exhaustive process of screening and selecting workers in Puerto Rico in order to provide U.S. agricultural employers with a reliable labor force for the duration of the contract.

As the report by the Presidential Commission on Migratory Labor concluded, the labor contract given to alien labor, the relationship with foreign governments, and the creation and expansion of farmers’ associations provided American agriculture with some “orderly” relations. In fact, the commission concluded that it was having an impact in improving working conditions for domestic migrant labor (174). By the early 1950s, Puerto Rican farmworkers, through the government’s FPP, had become part of American agriculture’s migratory labor system. The Puerto Rican government played a fundamental role in this process.
ORGANIZING PUERTO RICAN LABOR FOR U.S. AGRICULTURE

After the United States took over the island in 1898, Puerto Rico became a source of cheap labor for U.S. corporations largely based on certain constitutional and legal exclusions from the American polity sustained by the notion of the unincorporated territory justified by the Supreme Court in 1901. But these exclusions remained even after Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens under the Jones Act of 1917. For example, Puerto Ricans were excluded for decades from the federal minimum wage approved by Congress under the New Deal, something that Congress could do under the legal and constitutional exceptions approved by the Supreme Court for the territory. And even though the PPD had emerged in 1938 as a party of reform and of “social justice” for workers and peasants, by 1947 its Operation Bootstrap model for economic development was designed to market Puerto Ricans as cheap labor to U.S. corporations as one major incentive for these to settle on the island. The Commonwealth status approved in 1952 allowed Puerto Rico to enjoy fiscal autonomy over local matters so that the island government could keep offering local tax exemptions and cheap labor to U.S. corporations going to Puerto Rico. And although the Commonwealth status was supposed to represent a new era in U.S.–Puerto Rico relations, the island remained an unincorporated territory of the United States. Thus, the island’s marginal standing in the American polity allowed Puerto Rico’s government to use the territory’s exclusion from certain federal laws—like minimum wage and environmental protection—as incentives to attract American capital to the island.

Months after the government approved the Industrial Incentives Act in 1947 that launched Operation Bootstrap, another act with far-reaching consequences for the island was approved: the Migration Law. Although less remembered than its economic counterpart, this law is of equal significance for the island’s postwar social and economic development. It acknowledged that the organization and encouragement of migration would be government policy from then on. Migration functionaries liked to say that the government’s migration policy was the other face of Operation Bootstrap. And, indeed, it was. While Operation Bootstrap sought to provide cheap labor to U.S. corporations going to Puerto Rico, its migration policy allowed Puerto Ricans to work in U.S. agriculture and other areas of the American economy as cheap labor as well.

The Puerto Rican government became a labor contractor that, by moving farm labor from Puerto Rico to the U.S. mainland, provided a source of cheap labor to U.S. agriculture. According to Sierra Berdecía, the BEM, “facing the
surplus of unemployed workers in agriculture during the dead season . . . has acted as an intermediary between workers and mainland employers who need workers precisely during the same season.”16 The BEM became part of USES after the approval of the Wagner-Peyser act of 1950. Under this system, U.S. agricultural employers justified their demand for labor and requested Puerto Rican workers to satisfy these needs. Through its employment offices in Puerto Rico, the BEM evaluated and selected the workers able to go to the United States. These workers would go there with a contact approved by the Puerto Rican government. Once in the United States, these contract workers were serviced by the Migration Division. It made sure that employers abided by the contract and provided services for the “integration and adaptation” of the workers to their new environment. BEM opened regional offices in Puerto Rico’s major municipalities: San Juan, Ponce, Mayagüez, Arecibo, Aguadilla, Caguas, Humacao, and Guayama. Another branch office was opened in 1950 at the airport.17

The BEM’s Farm Placement Program was designed to move the surplus labor from the decaying sugar industry to U.S. farms. Unlike other sugar-producing areas, the sugar industry in Puerto Rico did not experience mechanization because of the excess supply of cheap labor on the island; “as a consequence, the agricultural phase of the sugar industry in Puerto Rico finds itself in a primitive state of technological development which hinders it from paying wages adequate to the living necessities of our workers.”18 Total employment in agriculture decreased from 203,000 workers in 1950–51 to 164,000 in 1954–55, and the total number of unemployed workers in agriculture increased from 21,000 in 1946–47 to 37,000 in 1950–51. The overwhelming majority of the unemployed in agriculture came from the sugar industry: from 15,000 in 1946–47 to 27,000 in 1950–51.19 The number of unemployment benefit claims in the sugar industry increased from 98,628 in 1949–50 to 125,099 in 1952–53, with almost all claims coming from workers in the agricultural field. Nevertheless, the number of unemployment claims in the sugar industry decreased to 85,690 in 1956–57, in large measure as a consequence of migration and the government’s FPP.

Even with the impact of migration in providing employment for the workers in the sugar industry, the unemployment rate in agriculture increased from 14.9 percent in 1953–53 to 17.8 percent in 1954–55. By 1960, agricultural workers represented only 24 percent of the island’s labor force, and sugar workers represented only 36 percent of all those working in agriculture.20 Not only was agriculture decaying in Puerto Rico, particularly the sugar industry, but the wages on the island were far lower than those in American agriculture. In 1959–60, for example, the prevailing wage set by the Puerto Rican govern-
ment’s contract for farmworkers going to the U.S. mainland was 80 cents per hour, with higher rates in tobacco harvesting, at 95 cents per hour, and $1 per hour in flower farms and greenhouses. In Puerto Rico that same year, the highest hourly wage in agriculture was paid in the industrial phase of sugar manufacturing, at 68 cents, while working in the cane fields paid 44 cents. Hourly wages in other agricultural areas were even lower: 45 cents at poultry farms, 43 cents in pineapple farms, 40 cents processing tobacco leaves, 37 cents at flower farms, and 28 cents at minor crop farms.

One of the consequences of the Michigan experience in 1950 was that the Puerto Rican government placed more attention on the screening and selection process of farmworkers going to the United States under the FPP. In order to avert the extensive discontent among farmworkers due to the living and working conditions in farm camps and to reduce the number of workers abandoning work before the end of their contract, labor functionaries made clear to prospective migrants the duties and conditions they would face on the U.S. mainland. The Department of Labor described the orientation process by 1952 as follows:

Local offices receive copies of the clearance orders from the central office and the quota of workers allocated to each of them. The local farm labor representative makes a preliminary selection of the best qualified workers to fill the order and called-in them. Complete orientation is given to the workers before selection by the employer or his representative as to the following points: 1) place of employment 2) name of employer 3) transportation to the mainland 4) wages 5) duration of the work agreement 6) kind of work to be performed 7) working conditions in labor camp 8) insurance policies 9) duties and rights of workers 10) compliance with the contract 11) importance of identification cards 12) any other matter of interest to the workers.

By this time, the local offices of the Farm Placement Program had to provide the BEM with a register of not only those interested in migration but those ready to move at little notice.

By 1952 the Department of Labor had intensified the screening and selection process for prospective farmworkers going to U.S. farms. For example, it required a set of documents necessary for the worker to apply to go to U.S. farms under the government's contract, including a birth certificate, a health certificate from a government health clinic (no more than six months old), a police certificate of good behavior to attest that the applicant had no criminal record (not older than six months), a reference letter from a farmer confirming that the applicant was a “bona-fide” farmworker, $30 for air transporta-
tion, and an identification photo. The signed reference letter from the farmer had to include information regarding the applicant’s agricultural jobs and whether the worker was “efficient and responsible in carrying out agricultural tasks.” The purpose of this requirement was to exclude all those unable to do the arduous and demanding farmwork in the United States and thus prevent worker desertion. The application form for the FPP also required that workers detail their working experience and the specific agricultural tasks performed. The police certificate would exclude not only those with a criminal record but also those linked to political or labor union activism. After workers were selected, labor officials provided them with a photo ID to be presented at the time of departure in Puerto Rico and arrival at a United States airport and at the farm contracted for work. The ID was used for identification purposes for the placement program, as proof of citizenship in the U.S. mainland, and to prevent unauthorized persons from going to the United States under the placement program. Recruitment was held at the local offices of the Department of Labor or at specific town halls throughout the island.

A flyer for the BEM’s Farm Placement Program is quite indicative of the department’s marketing toward prospective migrants. It featured a big drawing of a jíbaro con pava (the traditional peasant with a straw hat—also the symbol of the PPD) with the words “TRABAJADOR AGRICOLA” (farmworker). “If you are planning to work in the United States” described the advantages of going to do farmwork with a government contract, which guaranteed a $10,000 air flight insurance paid by the employer; an employer’s bond to provide payment, health insurance, compensation insurance for work-related accidents, wages and work for 160 hours per four weeks, and adequate housing; and no labor contractor fee.

As shown in table 6, the number of Puerto Ricans leaving the island to settle in the United States increased dramatically after 1947–48, according to Department of Labor statistics. Net migration (departures minus arrivals) in the 1950s reached a peak of close to 75,000 in 1952–53 and a low of nearly 14,000 in 1960–61. Total migration from 1947–48 to 1960–61 was 558,388, for an average of nearly 40,000 migrants per year during this period. The Department of Labor argued that the ebb and flow in the number of people leaving the island was due to pull factors (job availability) in the United States. During this period, the department characterized these migration statistics as “individual migrants” leaving the island on their own; this conclusion was based on the idea that workers going to the U.S. mainland under the FPP returned to the island after ending their work contract. On the other hand, as shown in table 7, the flow of agricultural workers going to the United States under the FPP kept a steady pace throughout the decade. From 1951–52 to 1960–61,
some 129,372 farmworkers were placed in U.S. farms (a total of 152,253 since 1947–48) for an average of close to 13,000 per year; this movement of workers reached its peak during this decade in 1956–57, with nearly 16,000 placements. The number of farm placements by the government program stayed the same throughout the decade, while the number of migrants going on their own varied from year to year, influenced by the vagaries of the labor market forces. In fact, while net migration decreased during the 1960s, in part due to better economic conditions on the island, the number of workers placed in the United States by the FPP increased steadily during this period. That is, while individual migration fluctuated and even decreased in the 1960s, the migration flow organized by the government kept a steady pace and even increased in this period. In addition, the Department of Labor estimated that between 10,000 and 15,000 farmworkers went on their own to the United States every year to work in agriculture.\textsuperscript{\text{27}}

The first group of Puerto Rican farmworkers going to the United States under the government’s placement program went to New Jersey; later, other farm employers began to hire Puerto Ricans in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Indiana, New York, Minnesota, Washington, Delaware, Michigan, and Wisconsin.\textsuperscript{\text{28}} As shown in table 8, by the mid-1950s the overwhelming majority of Puerto Rican workers in the FPP went to four states: New

\textbf{TABLE 6}

\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{NET YEARLY MIGRATION, 1947–48 TO 1960–61, BY FISCAL YEAR} & \\
\hline
1947–48 & 28,031 \\
1948–49 & 33,053 \\
1949–50 & 34,155 \\
1950–51 & 41,919 \\
1951–52 & 60,642 \\
1952–53 & 74,603 \\
1953–54 & 44,209 \\
1954–55 & 31,182 \\
1955–56 & 61,647 \\
1956–57 & 48,284 \\
1957–58 & 25,956 \\
1958–59 & 37,203 \\
1959–60 & 23,742 \\
1960–61 & 13,762 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

Jersey, Pennsylvania, New York, and Connecticut, with the largest contingent by far going to New Jersey. During this decade, New Jersey agricultural interests hired around half of all Puerto Rican contract laborers.

The number of agricultural cooperatives and individual employers hiring Puerto Ricans under contract increased after the creation of the FPP in Puerto Rico. In 1948, four employers hired island farmworkers, eight did so in 1949, fourteen in 1950, and thirty-six in 1951. But by the end of the decade, the vast majority of farm placements by the Puerto Rican government were concentrated in just a few agricultural associations. In 1957–58, for example, 9,948 of the 12,180 farm placements were hired by the Garden State Service Association, a mega-union of agricultural cooperatives and associations in the Northeast, mostly in New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut. But even here, the distribution was highly skewed: the Glassboro Service Association from New Jersey alone hired 5,772 Puerto Ricans, close to half of all placements that year.\(^9\) By the end of the 1950s, the Puerto Rican govern-

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### TABLE 7

**BEM JOB PLACEMENTS IN THE UNITED STATES, BY FISCAL YEAR**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>FARM PLACEMENTS</th>
<th>MIGRATION DIVISION</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1947–48</td>
<td>2,533</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2,533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948–49</td>
<td>5,796</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5,796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949–50</td>
<td>8,846</td>
<td>3,966</td>
<td>12,812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950–51</td>
<td>5,706</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951–52</td>
<td>12,491</td>
<td>8,108</td>
<td>20,599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952–53</td>
<td>14,417</td>
<td>13,167</td>
<td>27,584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953–54</td>
<td>14,088</td>
<td>10,751</td>
<td>24,839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954–55</td>
<td>11,628</td>
<td>10,683</td>
<td>22,311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955–56</td>
<td>11,750</td>
<td>13,885</td>
<td>25,635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956–57</td>
<td>15,776</td>
<td>11,720</td>
<td>27,496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957–58</td>
<td>12,180</td>
<td>11,147</td>
<td>23,327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958–59</td>
<td>11,728</td>
<td>10,482</td>
<td>22,210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959–60</td>
<td>11,733</td>
<td>12,767</td>
<td>24,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960–61</td>
<td>13,581</td>
<td>10,954</td>
<td>24,535</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ment was indeed a labor contractor for American agriculture, but just for a few major farm conglomerates.

The Puerto Rican government functioned not only as a provider of farm labor from Puerto Rico to U.S. agricultural interests but also as an intermediary between Puerto Rican labor and other employers in the U.S. mainland. The Migration Division was created to facilitate the integration and adaptation of Puerto Ricans in the United States. Among its many functions was to find employment for Puerto Ricans already settled in the U.S. mainland. From 1951–51 to 1960–61, the division’s employment program placed 113,664 persons in the United States (see table 7). Like the FPP in Puerto Rico, the division’s job placement program kept a constant pace throughout the decade of close to 12,000 placements per year. The majority of job placements by the Migration Division in the United States were in low-paying manufacturing jobs. The total number of job placements in the United States by the Puerto Rican government during this period—be it through the Farm Placement Program in Puerto Rico or the Migration Division in the United States—reached 243,036.

**TABLE 8**
Puerto Rico Farm Placements in the United States, by State and Selected Fiscal Years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>829</td>
<td>1,992</td>
<td>1,477</td>
<td>2,070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>591</td>
<td>863</td>
<td>1,127</td>
<td>1,284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>875</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>6,704</td>
<td>6,503</td>
<td>6,619</td>
<td>6,476</td>
<td>6,882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>2,536</td>
<td>1,788</td>
<td>1,108</td>
<td>962</td>
<td>1,446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>1,903</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>1,443</td>
<td>818</td>
<td>875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12,180</td>
<td>13,610</td>
<td>11,728</td>
<td>11,733</td>
<td>13,581</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

THE MIGRATION DIVISION:
GUIDING THE INCORPORATION OF INDIVIDUAL MIGRATION

While the FPP provided farm labor to U.S. agricultural interests, the Migration Division’s functions were more complicated. It also functioned as an intermediary between Puerto Rican labor and U.S. employers, and in addition it had to fulfill the task of promoting the incorporation of Puerto Ricans in the United States. While the government in Puerto Rico could mobilize the administrative structures of the colonial state to organize and encourage migration, the workings of the Migration Division in the United States were somewhat more complex and delicate. This extension of the Puerto Rican government in the United States functioned as a labor provider to U.S. employers, but it had additional functions as an intermediary between Puerto Ricans and the American polity: between Puerto Ricans and the different state structures in the United States (federal, state, local) and between islanders and the American community in general. For several decades, the Puerto Rican government through the Migration Division became the “representative” of Puerto Ricans in the United States for employers and government institutions at multiple levels.30

The primary function of the Migration Division was to “orient and advise” those Puerto Ricans living in the United States in their “adaptation” and incorporation to American society. For the most part, the division focused on those going to the U.S. mainland on their own; that is, it was created to oversee the flow of individual migration settling in the United States. Since the formulation of its migration policy, the Department of Labor tried to influence the movement of those who migrated to the United States on their own, always a greater number than those going to work on government contract. As stated in the department’s 1948–49 annual report:

The Bureau tries to reach these people through the radio with talks on climate, food, living and working conditions and information on requirements for entrance into the public schools. They are constantly warned of the danger of unscrupulous persons who might attempt to swindle them out of their money in their ticket fares, in cost of transportation upon arrival from the airport to their residence. They are advised as to the duties and responsibilities of citizenship and information required by individual cases is gladly furnished. Conferences before groups are given in addition to printed and mimeographed material and personal interviews. The material is distributed through mayors, public welfare offices, vocational schools and other agencies of the Government.31
In 1956, the department opened its Traveler Orientation Section, with offices throughout the island; its main function was to “orient and inform” prospective migrants regarding job and housing opportunities in the United States outside of New York City.

This program underlined for those planning to migrate the need to know English, to have a job or skill, to be in good health, and to be prepared to adapt to the culture and customs of the new country. That year, orientation committees for the island’s mayors were organized in a majority of municipalities, using these government structures to orient prospective migrants. Initially, the orientation program focused on agricultural workers going under contract to the United States, but after 1951 a greater emphasis was placed on those going on their own, which represented the bulk of Puerto Rican migration. In 1959–60, for example, migration functionaries made visits to 123 towns and 70 rural districts to provide orientation to prospective migrants, using both films and printed material. The department estimated that 170,000 persons were oriented through this program that year. The department’s orientation office at the San Juan International Airport provided information and advice to those going on their own to the United States on issues regarding jobs, education, and housing; it also offered counseling on other areas of settlement outside of New York City and tried to discourage those interested in moving to Florida and other Southern states.

The Migration Division was in charge of providing orientation and services to Puerto Ricans once they moved to the U.S. mainland, including those who came under the FPP. By 1956, the Migration Division had twelve offices in the United States, mostly in the Northeast, where Puerto Ricans were working or settling by then. In addition to the central office in New York and the two main offices in New York and Chicago, there were local offices in Hartford, Connecticut; Boston; Keyport and Camden in New Jersey; Rochester, Middletown, and Riverhead in New York, and Hamburg, Pennsylvania. La oficina de Puerto Rico (or the Commonwealth office) became a kind of consular office for many Puerto Ricans in the United States. Even in New York City, the oldest U.S. community, the division replaced Congressman Marcantonio as a provider of services and protection for the tens of thousands of newcomers from the island. As table 9 shows, as the Puerto Rican community increased in size during the 1950s, so did the number of visitors to division offices throughout the United States. Even though the operations of the Chicago office increased during this decade—reflecting the growing community there—the New York office remained the biggest in terms of functionaries and services provided, a reflection of the status of the city as the major Puerto Rican settlement in the United States.
As indicated by table 9, the most numerous of the services provided by the Migration Division was giving employment information to migrants; the majority of visits to its offices were people in search of jobs. When the Department of Labor began to produce data in 1956–57 on the movement of people to and from the island, 33.8 percent of those who departed by air that year went to the United States in search of jobs; 70 percent were between the working ages of fifteen and forty-four years old.35

In 1955–56, the Employment Section of the New York office of the Migration Division referred a total of 11,835 persons for employment, out of which 6,999 were hired. The overwhelming majority (74 percent) of old and new applicants that year were unskilled, and another 11 percent were semiskilled; the majority was male. Most of these placements (66 percent) were in manufacturing, followed by agriculture (15 percent), service (13 percent), and office and professional (6 percent). According to the Department of Labor, the major reason for these people not finding jobs was their lack of skills and English fluency. In that same year, the Chicago office referred 8,710 persons

### TABLE 9
TOTAL SERVICE REQUESTS IN MIGRATION DIVISION, BY FISCAL YEAR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>TOTAL SERVICES RENDERED*</th>
<th>NEW YORK OFFICE</th>
<th>CHICAGO OFFICE</th>
<th>EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948–49</td>
<td>19,320</td>
<td>19,320</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>10,815*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949–50</td>
<td>18,450</td>
<td>18,450</td>
<td>7,451</td>
<td>14,361**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950–51</td>
<td>16,332</td>
<td>16,332</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>9,874**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951–52</td>
<td>26,833</td>
<td>26,833</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>20,022**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952–53</td>
<td>45,321</td>
<td>33,783</td>
<td>11,538</td>
<td>23,141**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953–54</td>
<td>54,835</td>
<td>37,348</td>
<td>17,487</td>
<td>27,578**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954–55</td>
<td>57,673</td>
<td>41,118</td>
<td>16,555</td>
<td>30,112**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955–56</td>
<td>61,973</td>
<td>41,961</td>
<td>20,012</td>
<td>32,462**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956–57</td>
<td>70,027</td>
<td>45,374</td>
<td>24,553</td>
<td>54,980***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957–58</td>
<td>84,671</td>
<td>53,792</td>
<td>19,533</td>
<td>53,996***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958–59</td>
<td>82,487</td>
<td>54,128</td>
<td>17,977</td>
<td>59,202****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959–60</td>
<td>80,884</td>
<td>52,672</td>
<td>21,378</td>
<td>66,326****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960–61</td>
<td>77,523</td>
<td>52,987</td>
<td>19,815</td>
<td>67,483****</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Total number of persons seeking services in all of the U.S. offices of the Migration Division.
**New York Office only.
***New York and Chicago offices only.
****All Migration Division offices.

for employment, out of which 7,009 were hired, mostly in manufacturing, followed by services and lastly in agriculture. While a majority of placements by the BEM in Puerto Rico itself were in manufacturing, supplying labor to Fomento-subsidized plants, most of their placements in the United States were in agriculture, under the FPP. On the other hand, the majority of placements by the Migration Division were in nonagricultural jobs. For example, in 1954–55, 5,768 of the 6,999 placements by the New York office and 2,480 of the 3,684 placements by the Chicago office were in nonagricultural work. As with its counterpart in Puerto Rico, the BEM, the Migration Division placed Puerto Ricans in the United States in low-paying jobs in labor-intensive manufacturing industries.

Besides its employment placement program, the Migration Division was structured to provide information and services to Puerto Ricans in other areas of their incorporation to American society. The Service Section was in charge of providing aid and support to Puerto Rican farm and manufacturing workers in the United States placed by the government’s placement programs on the island and the U.S. mainland. The services provided included direct negotiation for employment, inspection of agricultural camps and living quarters, visits to camps and factories to investigate working and living conditions and accidents in and outside the job, and intervention in wage claims and medical assistance. The section serviced 16,834 migrant workers in the United States in 1951–52, up to 22,088 in 1953–54, and 24,127 in 1954–55. In 1960–61, there were 20,145 island farmworkers spread over eleven states in the Northeast and Midwest. That year, division field workers made 1,113 visits to camps and farms where the Puerto Ricans worked: 516 visits were related to complaints filed by workers and employers, and 597 visits were to instruct both workers and employers about the labor contract and its related rights, duties, and responsibilities. Some 5,948 workers were contacted personally that year.

The major purpose of the division’s Identification Section was to give proof of citizenship to Puerto Ricans for employment, education, health, and welfare services. The section also worked with state and city agencies regarding the correct verification and interpretation of documents from Puerto Rico. In addition, along with federal and state agencies, it implemented a campaign against the fraudulent use of Puerto Rican birth certificates by undocumented immigrants. In 1957–58, some 7,325 persons requested services from this section.

The aim of the division’s Social Service Section was to aid Puerto Rican families in confronting the major issues of adaptation to U.S. society, like insufficient economic resources, domestic relations, health and welfare, juvenile delinquency, and other matters in the field of social work. The majority of problems presented by clients were related to economic matters, followed
by housing concerns and complaints and compensations. In 1957–58, a year characterized by an economic downturn, the New York and Chicago offices received 7,346 visits to the Social Service Section, mostly related to unemployment, housing, and welfare issues.40 In 1957–58, some 9,679 Puerto Ricans received assistance by the Travel Aid Society at the Idlewild International Airport; two Puerto Rican social workers employed by the Migration Division worked in this office to take care of island migrants.41

The Education Section functioned mostly to provide access to English learning materials and classes for Puerto Rican adults and children living in the United States. Its “Learn English” campaign distributed fifty thousand copies of the pamphlet “La llave del exito” (“The Key to Success”) in 1953–54; it distributed two hundred and forty thousand pamphlets in 1957–58. In that year, the English campaign extended to twenty additional cities in the United States, and the New York City public school system expanded its English classes for Puerto Rican children and adults throughout the city.42 The Department of Labor claimed that ten thousand Puerto Ricans were enrolled in English classes for adults in the autumn of 1954 as a result of the Migration Division campaigns. This section also coordinated a teacher exchange program between Puerto Rico and schools in the United States.43

Throughout the 1950s, the division’s Education Section and Community Organization Section organized the “Inscríbase y vote” (“Register and vote”) campaign, distributing tens of thousands of “Use su derecho a votar” (“Exercise Your Right to Vote”) pamphlets. In its 1960–61 annual report, the Department of Labor claimed that one of the “outstanding achievements” of the division’s work that year was “the tangible demonstration of the awakening interest in politics” by U.S. Puerto Ricans as a consequence of “the registering and voting campaign during the elections” in the United States that year.44 From 1957 to 1959, the Information and Public Relations Section produced 1,422,200 prints of the division’s many publications. These included ones aimed at the Puerto Rican public, providing information on English programs, electoral registration, housing, employment, health services, and welfare services. There were also publications directed at the American public in general: these provided information on Puerto Ricans as American citizens, their culture, and their contributions to the local community.45

**PUERTO RICO’S GOVERNMENT AND PUERTO RICANS’ UNCERTAIN FUTURE IN THE UNITED STATES**

In the most extensive study of the Migration Division so far, Lapp argues that this institution failed to become an “ethnic representative” of the Puerto Rican
community in the United States. He called it “an ethnic bureaucracy manque,” an extension of the Puerto Rican government in the United States that had no constituency of its own and responded to the goals of the PPD government on the island. In the 1960s, the U.S. Puerto Rican communities developed their own leadership and agendas, pushing the division to the margins and developing their own representation in the American polity. The election of a pro-statehood government under the New Progressive Party in 1968 further delegitimized the division’s goals and internal functioning. Although the FPP lasted well into the 1970s, a lawsuit by apple growers questioning the need to hire Puerto Ricans under a labor contract finally put an end to the program.

The limited success of the Puerto Rican government’s placement programs in Puerto Rico and the United States in finding not only good jobs, but jobs in general in the U.S. mainland, shows the limits of the colonial state as a labor contractor. Be it in agriculture, through the FPP, or in manufacturing, mostly through the Migration Division’s employment program, the Puerto Rican government for the most part channeled migrants to low-paying jobs with no long-term employment security and benefits. And although the government’s labor contract offered protections and benefits to island farmworkers that domestic farmworkers largely did not enjoy, the actions of the Puerto Rican government in protecting these workers were not always the best. In general terms, the FPP benefitted U.S. agricultural interests. The fact that it sustained and reproduced the prevailing wage reflects how the labor contract was beneficial to American farm interests, in addition to providing them with a reliable and continued source of cheap labor.

Furthermore, the literature on Puerto Rican migration and the government’s own records attest to the extensive and continued instances where farm employers broke the labor contracts with no major penalties and consequences. Hundreds of boxes in Puerto Rico’s national archives belonging to the Department of Labor’s FPP are filled with farmworkers’ claims of contract violations. Furthermore, the fact that more Puerto Ricans decided to work in U.S. agriculture on their own with no government contract, as the department continuously complained, reflects on how little farmworkers thought of the celebrated contract or the government’s protection. In general, the Puerto Rican government failed to confront farm interests with contract violations, be it in terms of contract duration, wages, or working and living conditions. The government’s own track record in enforcing the contract and its ideology of cooperation with farming companies undermined the validity of the labor contract itself. At the end, the Puerto Rican government’s FPP maintained and sustained the migratory labor system that benefitted U.S. agricultural
interests in the postwar period at the expense of the laborers it was suppos-
edly designed to protect.  

Despite the programs and services provided to Puerto Rican migrants in
the United States by Puerto Rico’s government through the Migration Divi-
sion, significant sectors of the mainland community faced persistent rates of
poverty and economic and social marginalization for decades. Although many
Puerto Ricans experienced economic, social, and educational improvements
after the 1950s, particularly second-generation cohorts, the economic and
social indicators of the Puerto Rican community by the 1970s were rather dis-
mal, according to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights: in 1974, 32.6 percent
of Puerto Rican families living in the United States remained in poverty, and
85 percent of New York City’s one million Puerto Ricans lived in low-income
neighborhoods. Puerto Rican family earnings were only 59 percent of the
national average, 24.5 percent of Puerto Rican families received income from
public welfare, and in 1972, 8.8 percent of Puerto Rican men and 17.6 percent
of women were unemployed—rates higher than the national average. In addi-
tion, 60 percent of all Puerto Rican families living in poverty were headed by
a female single parent. Not only were Puerto Ricans employed in low-paying
jobs in agriculture, manufacturing, and services, but they settled primarily in
areas of the Northeast facing deindustrialization in the postwar period—New
York City is the best example—factors that were not conducive to their eco-
nomic and social mobility. Characterized by lower job skills, limited English
fluency, and less education, large sectors of the immigrant generation continu-
ously faced lower indicators of economic and social achievements than the
second generation. In addition to these factors, the commission stated that
“the evidence is compelling that racial, ethnic, and sex discrimination are bar-
riers to job opportunities for Puerto Ricans.”

While the Puerto Rican government cannot be blamed for the poverty that
existed in Puerto Rico by 1945, its postwar economic model largely benefi-
ted U.S. capital and sustained an economic and colonial order that marketed
Puerto Ricans as a source of cheap labor. Similarly, while the Puerto Rican
government was not the cause of postwar migration, its postwar migration
policies encouraged, promoted, and even organized the mass movement of
people from Puerto Rico that forever transformed the lives of Puerto Ricans
in the years to come. As Acosta-Belén and Santiago indicate, while tradi-
tional human capital models of migration argue that it is the highly skilled
in the homeland society that are most likely to move, in the case of Puerto
Rico, it was those considered surplus labor that the government encouraged
to migrate to the United States in the postwar period. Despite its efforts to
facilitate their incorporation into and adaptation to the metropolitan society,
the Puerto Rican government’s policies could not overcome the economic and social obstacles these migrants faced in the U.S. mainland. In concluding his widely influential study of the Migration Division, Lapp contends that the Puerto Rican government became an “apologist for an economic order that marginalized Puerto Ricans.”

The Puerto Rican government’s Operation Bootstrap and migration programs were designed to provide economic, social, and political stability to Puerto Rico in the postwar period. While Operation Bootstrap presented an economic development plan to provide economic growth and industrialization as a means of turning the island into a modern and politically stable society, migration was supposed to ease the pressures created by the island’s overpopulation and allow the realization of the PPD’s economic and political goals. In the minds of Puerto Rican and American policy makers, the 1950s became the golden era of economic and political development in Puerto Rico. During the Cold War period, in an attempt to win the “hearts and minds” of peoples in the so-called Third World, the U.S. government presented Puerto Rico as a showcase of capitalist development and political democracy imbued with American ideals and institutions. Nowhere in the local, national, and global campaigns showcasing Puerto Rico was the mass migration of Puerto Ricans to the metropolitan territory mentioned as one major reason for the apparent economic success of this era.

The limits of Operation Bootstrap in providing continued economic growth became obvious by the late 1960s, as the labor-intensive, low-paying manufacturing enterprises that the program attracted to the island began to leave for other areas of the global economy with lower wages and restrictions. The situation became so critical that by the early 1970s, the federal government had to intervene to prevent a furthering of the economic crisis and a possible social and political crisis as well. The increase in federal transfers to Puerto Rico sustained a weakened economy and a growing poor and marginal sector, as well as the colonial government. In addition, the metropolitan state once again used the island’s marginal position within the American polity as an unincorporated territory to create a special and protected space for U.S. capital with the Internal Revenue Service’s Section 936, which allowed American transnational corporations to produce huge amounts of profits on the island as the new bootstrap for economic growth and development. Although this metropolitan strategy benefitted American corporations, it created few jobs since mostly capital-intensive manufacturing plants came under this corporate welfare scheme. The end of Section 936, along with massive corruption and incompetence by successive PPD and Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP [New Progressive Party]) administrations, plunged the island in a spiral of
economic and social disarray that has persisted into the twenty-first century. The result has been a massive flow of people from the island, comparable to the great migration of the 1950s. By 2005, more Puerto Ricans lived in the U.S. mainland than in Puerto Rico. The 2010 census, for the first time in Puerto Rico’s history, marked an absolute decrease in population from the previous census. For many Puerto Ricans today, migration is seen as their best exit strategy in a crumbling economic, social, and political system. If in 1947 Operation Bootstrap and migration were seen as two sides of the same strategy, by the beginning of the new century, when Operation Bootstrap is no more than a evanescent memory of a seemingly golden past, migration remains for hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans the only plausible alternative facing a collapsing colonial order that was created more than a century earlier. The postwar migration history of past generations of Puerto Ricans should not be lost to those following their paths today.