

American Families Should Not Be Denied Food Just Because They Live in Puerto Rico

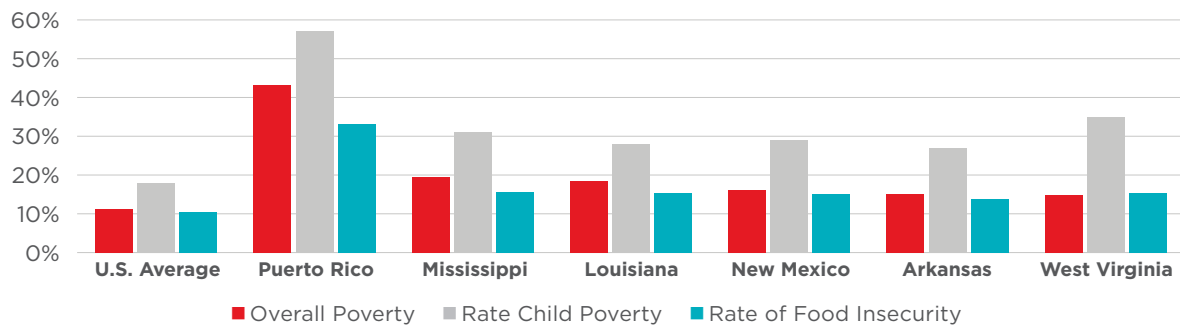
In Puerto Rico, low-income American citizens are denied help buying food because of where they live. Puerto Ricans are American citizens, just like people born in the 50 states. But the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the country's most important food program for people whose jobs don't pay enough to feed their families, [excludes Americans who live on the island](#). This cruel exclusion deepens the island's [hunger](#) and [poverty](#), which is already severe, damaging the health and well-being of children and families.

Puerto Ricans are stuck with rigid assistance levels defined by an arbitrary cap in federal law. If a hurricane or economic downturn makes more people need help in any state, Guam, or the Virgin Islands, SNAP automatically expands to fill the gap. Every qualifying family is guaranteed help. But people who live in Puerto Rico, American Samoa, or the Northern Mariana Islands are limited to the so-called Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP), with funding defined by inflexible federal statutes. If more people need help, everyone gets less food to eat.

Low-wage Puerto Rican workers receive [between \\$116 and \\$307 less](#) in help feeding their families each month. It is thus no surprise that hunger is far more widespread for residents on the island than for residents of any state. In 2020, the state with the largest percentage of residents going hungry was [Mississippi](#), where 15% of families did not have enough food to eat at some point during the year. By contrast, [40% of Puerto Rico families did not have enough food to eat in 2020](#).

Food insecurity takes a [terrible toll](#) on families' health and well-being. Mothers with major depression are more than twice as likely to live in families that don't have enough food to eat. Children who grow up with food insecurity are significantly more likely to develop asthma, anemia, and anxiety and to do poorly in school. Teens and young adults have twice the likelihood of becoming depressed or having suicidal ideation if their families experience food insecurity. The grim consequences of today's Puerto Rican hunger will reverberate for a lifetime.



Figure: Poverty Rates and Food Insecurity (Puerto Rico and Select States)

Source: Vélez-Hagan, Justin, Alex Karras, Michael Santorelli, and Charles M. Davidson. 2021. *Economic Contributions of the Food & Beverage Industry in Puerto Rico*. Washington, DC: Macro Policy Advisors, LLC. <https://puertoricosnap.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ECONOMIC-CONTRIBUTIONS-OF-THE-FOOD-BEVERAGE-INDUSTRY-PUERTO-RICO-4859-5257-1968-1.pdf>.

If Puerto Ricans can buy enough food to feed their families, farmers across the 50 states will make the additional income they urgently need. Only 30% of food consumed in Puerto Rico is grown or produced on the island, and [farmers in the 50 states supply 75% of Puerto Rico's food imports](#). Farmers and food producers in the 50 states already [earn more than \\$6.5 billion a year](#) from selling food to people living in Puerto Rico. Expanding Puerto Rican food markets would provide desperately needed relief to [American farmers](#) struggling with high production costs, tightening capital constraints, and [climate change](#).

Extending SNAP to Puerto Rico will strengthen program integrity, promote work, and encourage healthier food choices. Puerto Rico's archaic NAP structure has starved the program of resources needed to modernize its eligibility infrastructure. Transitioning to SNAP would allow [investments in eligibility systems](#) that make the determination of benefit levels more accurate and reliable. That transition would also allow Puerto Rico to offer employment and training services that equip families to move towards full self-sufficiency, as well as nutrition education programs that help families make healthier food choices.

Extending SNAP to Puerto Rico would return America's primary food assistance program to its original plan. [From 1974 until 1982](#), low-income Puerto Ricans qualified for the same help putting food on the table that was guaranteed to their cousins who lived in the states. But when Congress changed the Food Stamp program into SNAP, they sought to save money off the backs of Puerto Ricans by slashing their nutrition support and relegating them to an inferior NAP program. It is time to reverse that injustice.

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