

Child poverty and hunger set to spike in Puerto Rico

Alberto Escalera
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A recent study conducted by the Institute of Youth Development (IYD) in Puerto Rico is warning of a sharp increase in the already shameful level of child poverty in the US colony due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The increase in the number of youth living in extreme poverty is by no means a phenomenon limited to places like Puerto Rico. Poverty and hunger among children across the globe, including in countries like the United States, have now reached levels without modern precedent.

According to the authors of the IYD study, “Los efectos del Covid-19 en la niñez de Puerto Rico: Vulnerabilidades, proyecciones y recomendaciones,” in the absence of significant measures to mitigate the trend, the percentage of children living in extreme poverty in Puerto Rico is likely to rise this year from 58 percent to a staggering 65 percent. The study highlights that within the first four months of 2020, an additional 244,000 residents of Puerto Rico fell below the federal poverty line, including 43,000 children.

Even before the pandemic, Puerto Rico, with a current population of just over 3 million, was reeling from a decade-long economic recession, chronically low labor force participation rates and a public debt crisis that served as a pretext for years of severe austerity policies. These conditions provoked an exodus of approximately 500,000 people during the same period. A significant number of those that left Puerto Rico were of prime working age, resulting in a demographic shift in which people age 60 and older now represent 26 percent of the population. Approximately 40 percent of the elderly in Puerto Rico also live below the poverty line.

As the IYD study points out, working families in Puerto Rico were already facing elevated levels of economic and food insecurity as well as associated health risks when the pandemic struck. The high percentage of single-parent households and workers susceptible to layoffs due to economic closure are additional factors that have

deepened the social impact of the pandemic.

Despite the important exposures of capitalism’s failures contained in the IYD report, the narrow political perspective of its authors leads them to deflect from the structural roots of poverty down the blind alley of policy recommendations which, even in the unlikely event of being fully implemented, will do nothing to address the structural roots of poverty.

For example, the authors advocate for an extension of the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC) to Puerto Rico, as well as a combination of cash payments to the working poor and unemployed and tax credits to employers. These paltry measures, which are already being implemented to some degree in the mainland US, have done little to stem the increase in poverty there, particularly among children.

Another policy prescription proposed by the report’s authors calls for including Puerto Rico in the federal Pandemic EBT program enacted by the US Congress this past March. The EBT program, which is intended to compensate for the lost school meals of school-aged children due to school closures by placing the value of those meals on debit-like, electronic cards that families can use to purchase food, has been plagued by a series of problems since its inception.

Under the EBT program, families receive \$5.70 for each day of school missed due to the pandemic. In states like Texas, where the school year ends earlier than in other parts of the country, this amounts to just \$285 per school-aged child. In New York state, families are set to receive a meager \$420.

It is important to highlight that according to the Consumer Price Index Summary included on the US Bureau of Labor Statistics website, April saw the largest monthly increase in food prices since February of 1974. This increase in food prices is taking place amid the mass dumping of foodstuffs and euthanizing of livestock while

scores of people go hungry.

A recent *New York Times* article pointed out that as of May 15, only 15 percent, or 4.4 million of the 30 million children who qualify for the EBT program, have received any benefits since it was started in March. In addition to delays stemming from the patchwork of state and federal nutrition programs and the lack of centralized data collection system on a national level, many state governors have either postponed applications to the EBT program or refused to participate altogether. This apparent lack of urgency on the part of many state governors can only be understood as part of the cynical strategy being pushed by the ruling class to starve working families back to work under dangerous conditions.

The question of reallocating resources from school meal programs to needy children during the COVID-19 pandemic recently provoked mass outrage in Puerto Rico, which was excluded from the Pandemic EBT program approved by Congress in March.

After weeks of schools being closed due to the pandemic, the Puerto Rico Department of Education (DE) finally opened up a limited number of school lunch facilities, *comedores escolares*, on May 6. Only 10 of Puerto Rico's 78 municipalities, including San Juan with a population of over 300,000 residents, initially opened school lunch facilities to serve one hot meal a day to needy children.

A wave of protests eventually forced the DE to expand the number of open school lunch facilities to 105, an amount that remains woefully inadequate to address the needs of 180,000 low income, school-aged children that qualify for free meals in Puerto Rico. Last week, a group of parents successfully petitioned a Puerto Rico court to order the DE to open as many school lunch facilities as necessary. However, school officials in Puerto Rico have yet to make public any plans to carry out the court ruling.



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