

Demographers identify the causes, challenges of a rapidly aging Puerto Rico

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Credit: Christian Crocker/unsplash.com

The Puerto Rican population is aging rapidly, with the percentage of older adults on the island the 10th highest in the world. Penn State researchers are discovering, for the first time, the causes of population

aging and how it will negatively impact Puerto Rico.

Amílcar Matos-Moreno, postdoctoral scholar in the Social Science Research Institute's Population Research Institute and native of Puerto Rico, began looking into the issue after noticing many working-age adults leaving the island following a series of economic challenges and natural disasters.

"I was surprised to find that over the last 10 years, Puerto Rico has nearly doubled its percentage of adults older than age 65 due to the outmigration of over 700,000 working age adults," said Matos-Moreno. "This shift has massive implications for Puerto Rico, which is still struggling to recover from several hurricanes, earthquakes, and political upheaval."

Matos-Moreno and other [population](#) researchers looked at several studies, including the "Puerto Rican Elderly: Health Conditions Study," which collected data on social, economic and [health conditions](#) from 4,291 older adults in 2002, with follow ups in 2006 and 2019.

The team also looked at several studies that examined the associations between familial separation and [mental health](#), social networks and psychological well-being, and the sociodemographic characteristics of older adults. They found that several factors are negatively impacting this segment of the population, including outmigration, lack of services, and kinlessness. Their work was published in *The Gerontologist*.

"The older adults left behind as a result of outmigration are facing many challenges, including a reduction in [government services](#), poor economy, disruption of social support networks and increased isolation, which can lead to health issues," said Matos-Moreno. "As a result, Puerto Rico faces significant challenges in improving income security, providing [health care services](#), and assuring the well-being of its aging population."

The Puerto Rican government has tried to address the problem of an aging population by passing the Demographic Challenge Act, which studied the factors impacting demographics on the island and the needs of older adults. However, according to Matos-Moreno, the government has mostly focused on policies that address how longevity and fertility impact aging populations.

"The population of Puerto Rico continues to decline and rapidly age, but no one has paid attention to outmigration's impact on population aging. Through our research, we noticed new factors including outmigration and kinlessness that can hopefully provide insight into the problem," said Matos-Moreno.

According to the researchers, kinlessness describes a growing population of older adults who do not have a spouse, children or siblings. In addition, they are expanding the definition to include the migration of all family members.

"The Puerto Rican population is also experiencing kinlessness through migration, which is a new concept and something that has not been examined before," said Matos-Moreno.

Kinlessness will further impact Puerto Ricans as they age, because the support that their children could provide is not there. The resulting loneliness and [social isolation](#) could have further impacts on an already vulnerable population moving forward.

Adding to these challenges, the Puerto Rican government has also implemented an array of measures to reduce government spending. These measures include limiting government services, laying off public employees, eliminating social welfare programs and reducing retirement workers' pensions. According to Matos-Moreno, this is concerning, because the researchers found [older adults](#) in Puerto Rico rely on

government services such as Medicare, Social Security and public assistance.

"The government needs to address these reductions and incentivize working-age adults to stay or return and contribute to Puerto Rico's family structure, health care system, and economy," Matos-Moreno said. "We can't look to other countries as to what might happen, because Puerto Rico is the first to be so widely impacted by outmigration and the reduction of social services."

More information: Amílcar Matos-Moreno et al, Aging and the Left Behind: Puerto Rico and Its Unconventional Rapid Aging, *The Gerontologist* (2022). [DOI: 10.1093/geront/gnac082](https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnac082)

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