



*Teaching
Genealogists AI™*
Instructor: Sylvia
Vargas

Census Records for Puerto Rican Genealogy

Module 7 — Migration Patterns

Course Instructor: Sylvia Vargas
Organization: Puerto Rican Genealogy Group
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Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will:

- Understand the major migration periods in Puerto Rican history and what drove them

- Recognize how internal and external migration appears in census records
 - Track a family's movement across census years using systematic comparison
 - Identify mainland U.S. records for Puerto Rican migrants
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Section 1 — Why Migration Analysis Matters

One of the most common research failures in Puerto Rican genealogy is looking for an ancestor in the wrong place. A family documented in Rincón in 1900 may appear in Mayagüez in 1910, San Juan in 1930, and New York City in 1940 — all in the same generation.

Migration was not the exception in Puerto Rican history. It was the norm. Economic disruption, natural disasters, agricultural restructuring, and deliberate policy all pushed and pulled families across the island and to the mainland.

Census records are the primary tool for tracking these movements — but only if you know what to look for and where to look.

Section 2 — Internal Migration within Puerto Rico

Agricultural Economy and Geographic Patterns

Puerto Rico's pre-1898 economy was built around two primary crops with different geographic footprints:

Coffee grew in the western and central highlands — municipalities including Rincón, Añasco, Las Marías, Lares, and Yauco. The coffee economy required large, stable labor forces living near the haciendas. Families in these municipios tended to remain in the same barrio across generations.

Sugar dominated the coastal lowlands — the north and east coasts and the southern plain. Sugar operations were more industrial, and labor demands shifted seasonally.

After 1898, U.S. corporate investment dramatically expanded the sugar economy and contracted the coffee economy. This restructuring pushed highland coffee workers toward coastal sugar towns and urban centers. Families that had been rooted in the same western barrios for generations began to move.

Key Internal Migration Periods

1898–1910 — Economic Transition

U.S. takeover disrupted the coffee trade and restructured land ownership. Many highland families lost access to land they had farmed and began moving toward coastal towns, Ponce, and San Juan.

1928 — Hurricane San Felipe

On September 13, 1928, Hurricane San Felipe devastated Puerto Rico's coffee-growing regions. The western highlands — including Rincón, Añasco, and surrounding municipios — suffered catastrophic crop losses. Many families who had survived the 1898 economic disruption were displaced entirely by the storm.

1932 — Hurricane San Ciprián

A second major hurricane struck four years later, compounding displacement in already struggling communities.

1930s – Great Depression

Economic contraction throughout the island intensified urbanization, drawing families toward San Juan and Ponce.

How Internal Migration Appears in Census Records

When tracking a family across census years, watch for:

- A change in municipio between census years
- A change in barrio within the same municipio
- An occupation shift from agricultural (*agricultor, jornalero*) to urban or service work
- Household composition changes — extended family separating, adult children appearing in different households

The 1910, 1920, 1930, and 1940 federal censuses all record municipio and barrio of residence. Systematic comparison across all four years reveals migration patterns.

Section 3 — Migration to the U.S. Mainland

The Jones-Shafroth Act (1917) and U.S. Citizenship

The Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917 granted U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans. While some migration to the mainland had occurred earlier — primarily contract labor and military service — citizenship opened the path for broader migration.

World War II and War Industry (1940s)

During World War II, Puerto Ricans served in the U.S. military in large numbers and took war industry jobs on the mainland. Some remained after the war ended.

Operation Bootstrap and the Great Migration (1947–1960s)

Operación Manos a la Obra (Operation Bootstrap), launched in 1947, was a U.S.-supported industrialization program designed to transform Puerto Rico's economy from agricultural to manufacturing. The program deliberately encouraged migration to the mainland to reduce unemployment pressure on the island.

The result was one of the largest migrations in Puerto Rican history:

- Approximately 500,000 Puerto Ricans migrated to the mainland between 1945 and 1965
- New York City became the primary destination, particularly the South Bronx, East Harlem (*El Barrio*), and Brooklyn
- Secondary destinations included Chicago, Philadelphia, and New Jersey

Families that appear complete in the 1940 Puerto Rico census may be split across Puerto Rico and New York by 1950.

Section 4 — Tracking Migration in Census Records

The Multi-Year Comparison Approach

The most effective way to track migration is systematic comparison across all available census years. Use Worksheet WS_03 (Federal Census Multi-Year Matrix) to organize this.

For each family member:

1. Record municipio and barrio in each available census year
2. Note occupation in each year
3. Track age and birth year estimates across years
4. Identify who disappears from the household and when

Disappearance from a Puerto Rico census after 1940 often signals mainland migration.

The 1940 Census: A Special Tool

The 1940 U.S. Federal Census asked each person where they had lived **five years earlier** (in 1935). This “place of residence in 1935” column is uniquely valuable for tracking migration. If a person appears in a New York City census in 1940 but lists Puerto Rico as their 1935 residence, you have documentary evidence of migration timing.

Searching for Puerto Rican Migrants in Mainland Records

Puerto Rican migrants in mainland U.S. census records present specific research challenges:

Name spelling: Spanish surnames were frequently anglicized or misspelled. *Rodríguez* becomes *Rodriguez* or *Rodregas*. *José* becomes *Joe* or *Joseph*.

Birthplace field: Look for “Puerto Rico” (sometimes recorded as “PR,” “Porto Rico,” or even misidentified as a foreign country in earlier records).

Language: Many Puerto Rican households in 1940s–1950s New York reported Spanish as their home language. This can help identify Puerto Rican households in city directories and census indexes.

Key mainland collections to search:

- U.S. Federal Census 1940 and 1950 ([FamilySearch](#) , [Ancestry](#)) — search by birthplace “Puerto Rico”
 - New York City vital records (births, marriages, deaths) — New York Municipal Archives
 - New York State Census 1925, 1935 ([Ancestry](#)) — captured some migrants before federal censuses
 - Social Security Death Index — provides dates and states of death for individuals with Social Security numbers
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Section 5 — The FAN Club Approach to Migration Research

Migration rarely happened in isolation. Families moved with neighbors, extended kin, and community members from the same barrio or municipio. This social network — Family, Associates, and Neighbors (FAN club) — is a powerful research tool.

When you identify a family in a Puerto Rico census, note the names of neighboring households. If you lose track of the family in a later census, search for those same neighbors. People from the same community often migrated together and settled near each other on the mainland.

A Puerto Rican family from Barrio Añasco Arriba who disappears from the 1940 census may reappear clustered with other families from the same barrio in a specific New York City neighborhood.

Section 6 — Research Strategy

1. **Establish baseline** — Confirm where the family lived in the earliest available census year.
 2. **Track year by year** — Check every available census year (1910, 1920, 1930, 1940, 1950) for the family.
 3. **Note disappearances** — When a family member disappears, identify the most likely census year and destination.
 4. **Check the 1940 “five years ago” column** — This provides a narrow window on migration timing.
 5. **Search mainland records** — If the family migrated, search 1940 and 1950 U.S. mainland census by birthplace.
 6. **Use the FAN club** — Track neighbors and associates from the same municipio and barrio.
 7. **Document all negative searches** — Record every search that produced no result, including the database, search terms, and date.
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Worksheet Included

- WS_03 — Federal Census Multi-Year Matrix
 - Migration Tracking Log (part of Multi-Year Matrix)
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Reflection Questions

1. Your ancestor appears in Rincón in the 1910 census but is absent from the 1920 census. What are the most likely explanations? What would you search next?
 2. A family member who was 35 in the 1940 Puerto Rico census cannot be found in the 1950 Puerto Rico census. What mainland U.S. records would you search, and what information would you use to find them?
 3. How does knowing that Hurricane San Felipe devastated western Puerto Rico in 1928 change how you interpret a family's absence from their ancestral barrio in the 1930 census?
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What's Next

Module 8 — Correlating Census with Civil Records shows how to use census findings to locate birth, marriage, and death records — and how civil records in turn lead back to earlier census generations.

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