

PUERTO RICO EARLY CHILDHOOD NEEDS ASSESSMENT 2020



Solicitud de Autorización CEE-SA 2020-7589



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Prepared by:



BACKGROUND

The Administration for Care and Comprehensive Development of Children (ACUDEN for its acronym in Spanish) received an allocation of federal funds from the Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five Program (PDG B-5) for the purpose of updating early childhood planning efforts in Puerto Rico. This allocation will contribute to the strengthening and implementation of an integrated, mixed and coordinated system that will facilitate the access of children and families to high quality services for their development and the improvement of their quality of life.

METHODOLOGY

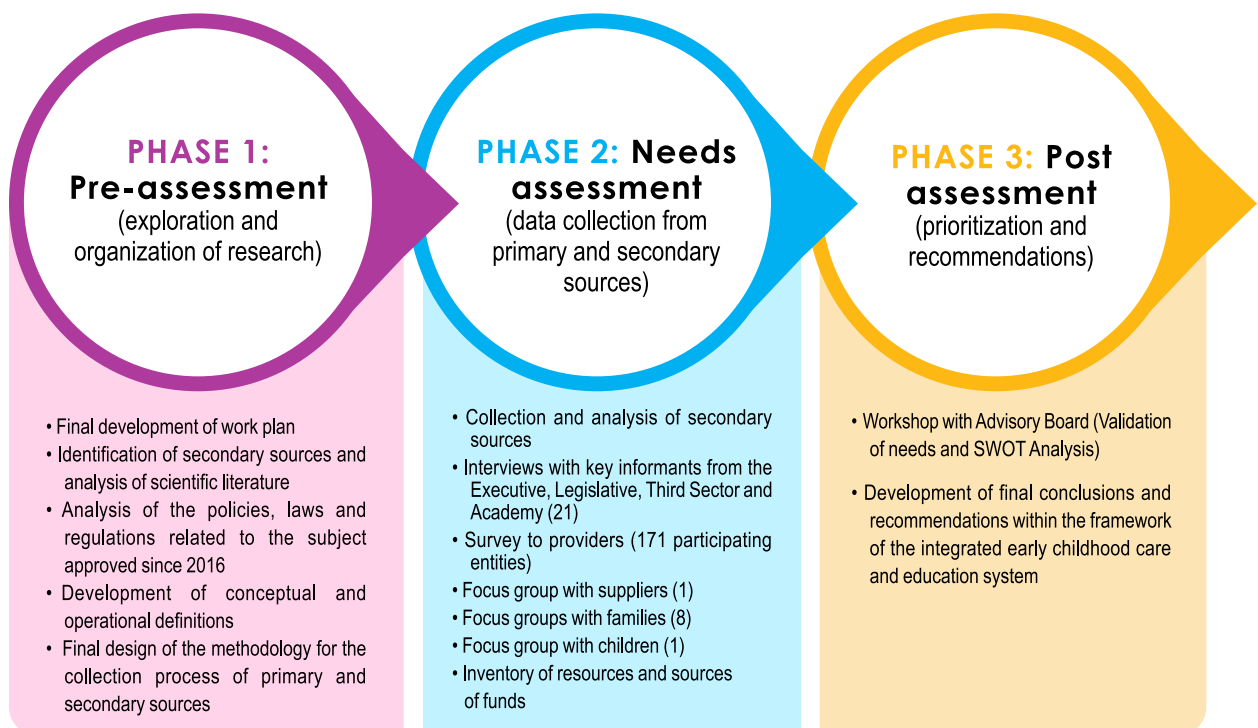
To carry out the Puerto Rico Early Childhood Needs Assessment, 2020 a multi-method, participatory approach was used, in order to engage a wide array stakeholders. Specifically, work was conducted using the research technique known as triangulation, which is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as on the use of information from primary and secondary sources with the objective of being able to contrast and validate the findings. To carry out the study, ACUDEN contracted the services of the consulting and research firm Estudios Técnicos , Inc. and had the collaboration of a group of experts in early childhood issues.

LEADING RESEARCH QUESTION

WHAT ARE THE NEEDS ASSOCIATED TO EARLY CHILDHOOD IN PUERTO RICO?

The main research construct "early childhood related needs" was defined as: The difference between the current condition and the ideal condition. In other words, the difference between the availability and access to services that early childhood (from birth until 8 years of age) and their families currently have, compared to the types of services they should be receiving so that they can have optimal integral development. It includes the availability and access or not, to adequate, quality and integrated services, as well as those gaps or limitations associated to the service system and institutional framework that prevent or impose barriers to the availability, access and coordination of such services.

TASKS AND STAKEHOLDERS ENGAGEMENT



DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

- **Access to service**- Ability to acquire a service considering the availability of the service; the person's knowledge of its availability; the opportunities to be able to obtain it, including: getting there, being served and the ability to be able to pay for it.
- **Adequacy of service**- A set of characteristics of a service that allows it to satisfy the need it intends to attend according to the characteristics of the target population.
- **Availability** - Level of service provision.
- **Barriers to service**- Limitations on service availability, and opportunities to access it, including: presence of the service, knowledge about its availability, becoming served, and ability to acquire the service.
- **Enabling environment**- A set of characteristics that includes legal and regulatory conditions, coordination of sectors and agencies to guarantee the provision of services and the availability of financial resources for early childhood development.
- **Integration** - Efficient inter-sectoral coordination of programs, services, activities and initiatives through partnerships between all sectors working with early childhood Sectors include: the family, the government (federal, central and municipal), community and/or faith-based organizations, the Academy, among others.
- **Quality of services**- Capacity that the service has to meet the need for which it was designed through its different characteristics, including: specific criteria or standards established in the way it is provided according to professional bodies to obtain pre-established results, preparation of those who provide the service, materials and conditions in which the service is provided and its interaction with other services.
- **Quality Early Childhood Care and Educational System** - A coordinated set of programs, efforts, and initiatives involving the private, nonprofit, and government sectors at the national and federal levels with the goal of achieving the well-being and development of early childhood children and their families. Among the areas covered by the system are: safe birth, health, education, family, security, art and culture, play, recreation and sports. It also ensures adequate funding for programs, availability and access to services, and quality, among others.
- **Service Gap** - Difference that exists between the service that is offered compared to the one that should be offered considering: what the recipient expects, the correct design and criteria for the service, the timely delivery of the service, and the performance of the service provider according to what he promises to offer.
- **Vulnerable and underserved populations**– Includes children living under poverty levels 0-8 years of age, as well as other children who confront other vulnerabilities, including children living outside the metropolitan area, children with special needs, single parent households, and children of moderate or median income, affected by recent disasters and the pandemic and who are not eligible to local or federally funded programs.



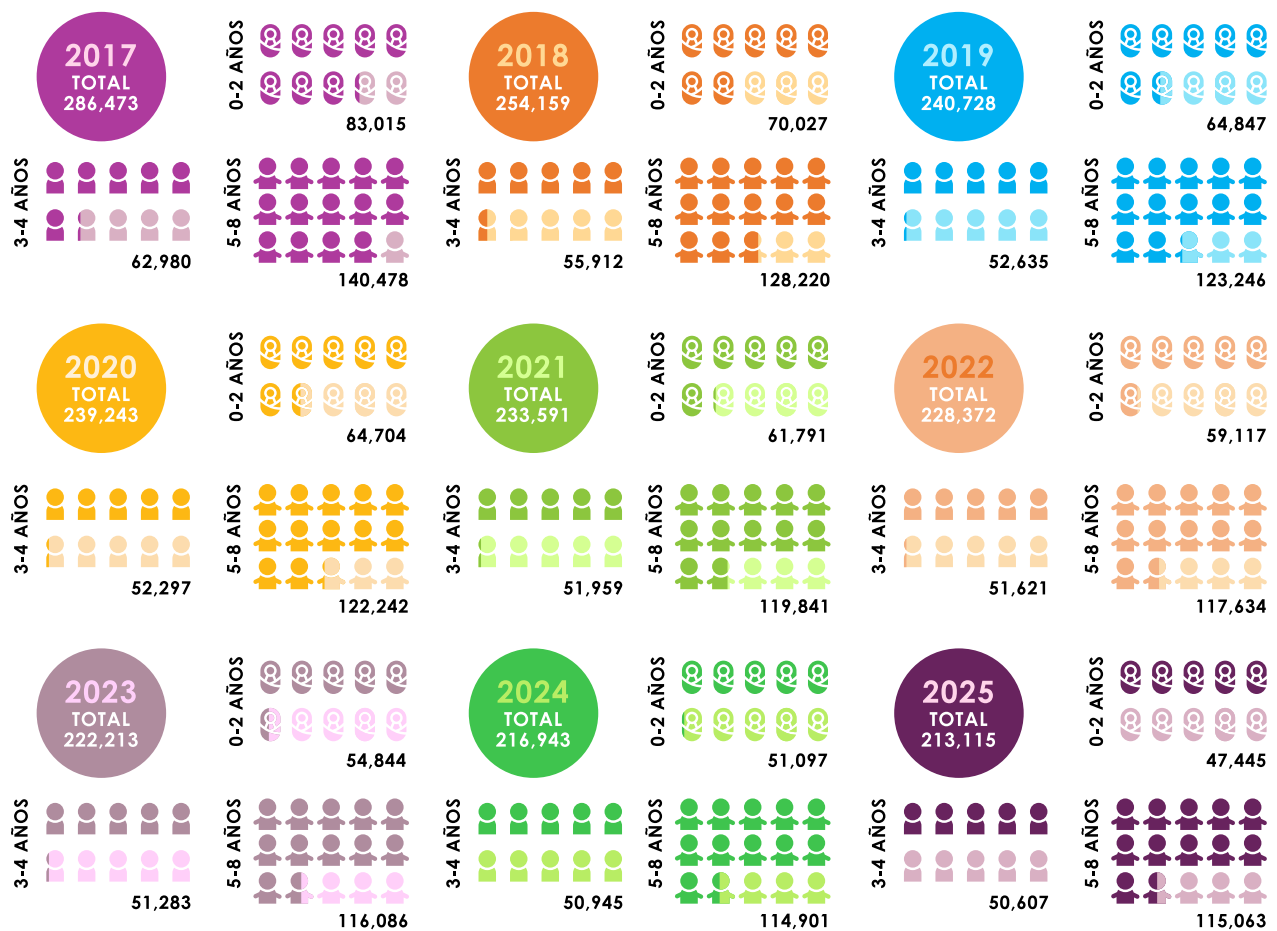
SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Over the past decades, and more so since 2006, Puerto Rico has faced unprecedented challenges due to a series of changes in the economic, social and environmental context. This level of complexity has increased following the implementation of fiscal policies associated with PROMESA, Hurricanes Irma and Maria, earthquakes in the southwestern region of the island, and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

This large number of external stressors has highlighted the vulnerability of our institutions and the limitations in the capacity to serve the neediest populations, including early childhood and their families. This, in turn, makes the need for an integrated, mixed and coordinated system that facilitates access to quality services much more compelling.

EARLY CHILDHOOD POPULATION IN PUERTO RICO - ESTIMATES AND PROJECTION 2017-2025

According to the Annual Population Estimates made by the U.S. Census Bureau (hereinafter ACS) in 2018, 13.5% of households in Puerto Rico have children at an early age, as defined for the purposes of this study (0 to 8 years old). This implies an estimated population of children between the ages of 0 and 8 in Puerto Rico of 254,159 by 2018. Estudios Técnicos, Inc., the firm that conducted the need assessment, has estimated a consistent reduction in this population from 0 to 8 years, and it is expected to reduce to 213,115 by 2025, which represents an annual reduction of 2.5%.



Sources: US Census Bureau (2020). Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Single Year of Age and Sex (Several Years). Estimates by Estudios Técnicos, Inc. (September 3, 2020).

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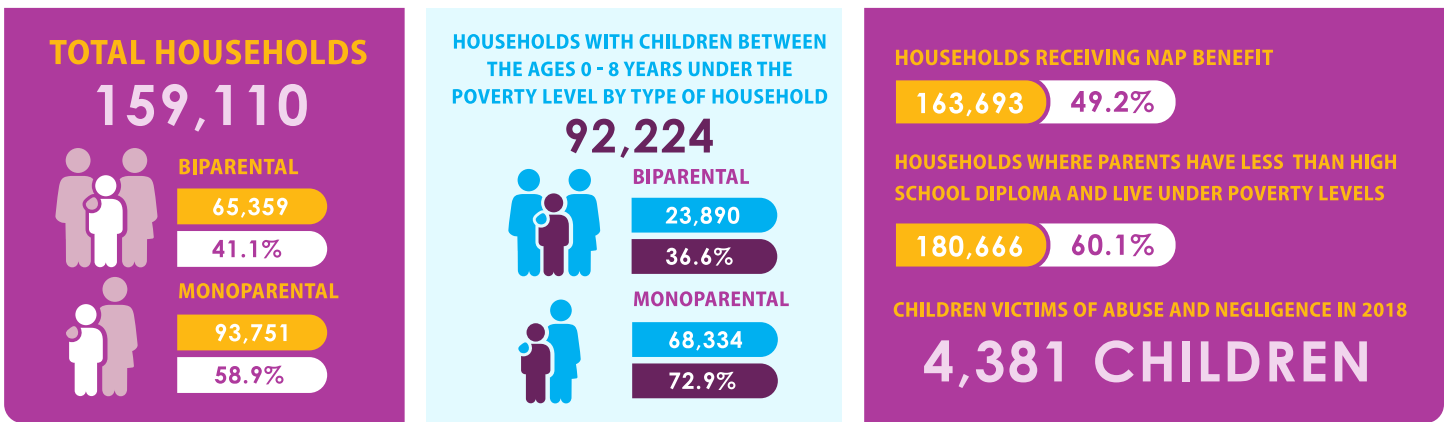
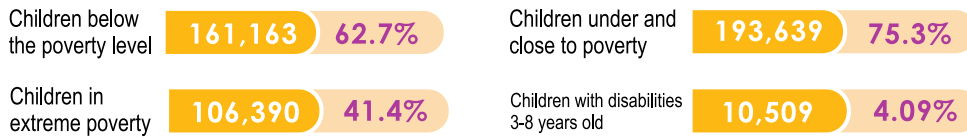
According to ACS estimates in 2018, of the total number of children aged 0 to 8, 62.7% live below the poverty level (161,100 children), of which more than half live in extreme poverty, 66% (106,400 children).

RELEVANT ASPECTS RELATED TO THE SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD IN PUERTO RICO

The official data available on early childhood in Puerto Rico, as well as recent research, demonstrate how our children constitute one of the populations with the highest levels of vulnerability in the country. According to ACS estimates in 2018, of the total number of children from 0 to 8 years old, 62.7% live under the poverty level (161,100 minors), of which more than half live in extreme poverty. As documented throughout the study, this has an impact on poor access to services and on the different dimensions of their development as individuals. Even though child poverty affects the country in general, it is observed in a more accentuated manner in some population groups, such as single-parent families and in municipalities outside the Metropolitan Area.

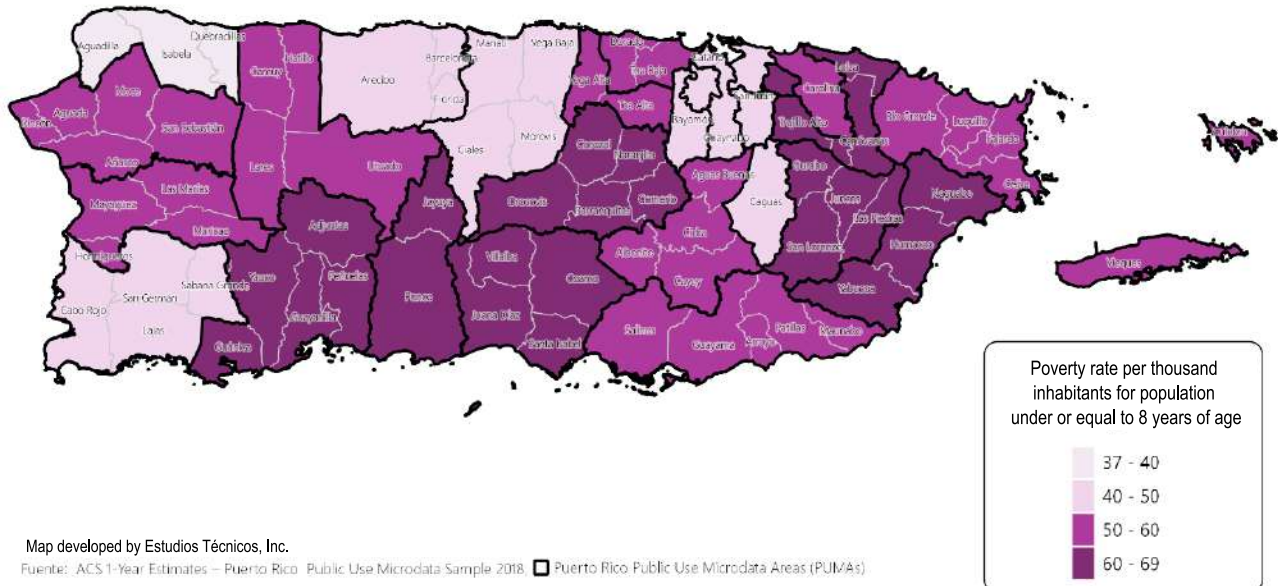
VULNERABLE AND UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS

CHILDREN UNDER POVERTY LEVEL



Source: Puerto Rico Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau. Estimates for 1 year (2018).
 *Preliminary data.

RATE OF CHILDREN FROM 0 TO 8 YEARS OLD UNDER LOW POVERTY LEVEL

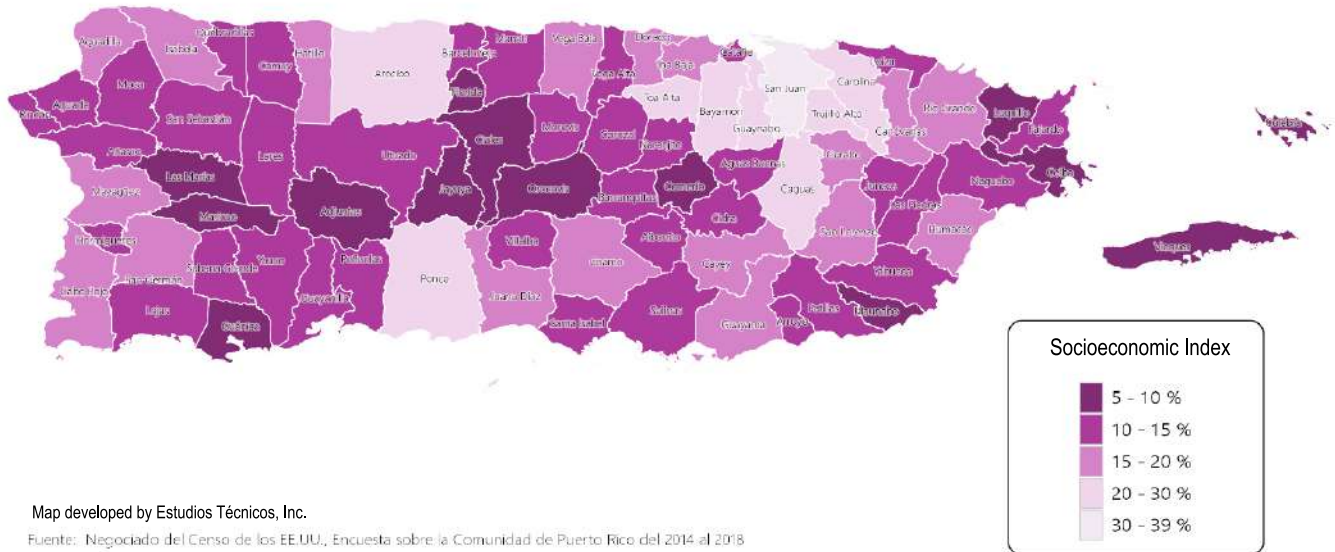


CALCULATED SOCIOECONOMIC INDEX

The team of Estudios Técnicos, Inc. developed a socioeconomic index that allows to see the behavior of several of these variables in geographic terms.

The index is composed of six variables, including median income, estimated per capita income, poverty level, educational level, percentage of families with children under 5 years of age and percentage of families that receive public assistance. The lower the index and the more intense the color, the greater the level of vulnerability in those municipalities with respect to these variables.

SOCIOECONOMIC INDEX DEVELOPED BY ESTUDIOS TECNICOS, INC.

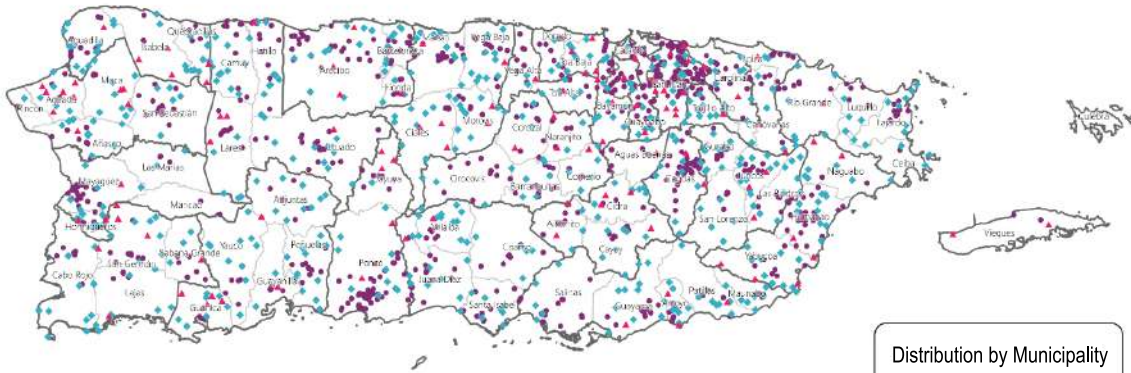


AVAILABLE SERVICES AND NUMBER OF CHILDREN BEING SERVED

Three of the most important components of the service system for children ages 0-8 in Puerto Rico are licensed childcare centers, Head Start and Early Head Start centers, and public system schools with Pre-Kindergarten grades. As part of the needs assessment, a total of 2,226 care and education service centers were identified, including 972 HS/EHS centers, 1,137 licensed care centers, and 117 public schools that have Pre-Kindergarten.

Beyond the information provided by the Census Bureau's community survey that focuses on the population 3 years +, there is no unified database to quantify the total number of children currently receiving services from the system and those who are not served. The most recent American Community Survey data (2018) indicate that of the total 185,652 children between the ages of 3 and 8 estimated in 2018, 87.2% were enrolled in a school or preschool. This percentage is lower, when only the cases of children living under the poverty level are analyzed (86.1%). In the case of children between the ages of 3 and 4, the Community Survey shows 63.3%. Meanwhile, based on the data available in the Head Start Enterprise System, it was identified that 30,700 children were enrolled in Early Head Start and Head Start programs in 2018, of which 88% live in poverty. Recent research on the impact of Hurricane María on Children, conducted for the Institute of Youth Development (2018) revealed that when considering the 0-5 age group only 30% were enrolled in school or care. The differences between these two numbers are probably due to the fact that in the case of the 0-3 year-old population, the percentage of children attending a child care or preschool center is much lower. In fact, as the income level decreases, the less percent are enrolled.

DISTRIBUTION OF CARE AND EDUCATIONAL SERVICES CENTERS BY MUNICIPALITY



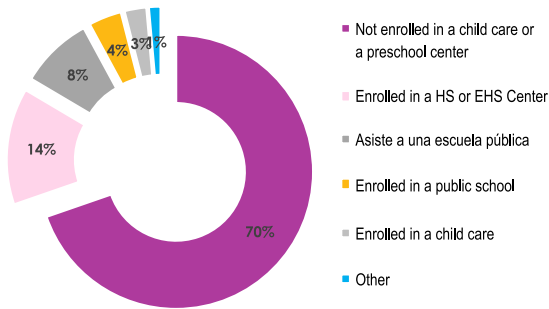
Map developed by Estudios Técnicos, Inc.

□ Puerto Rico Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs)

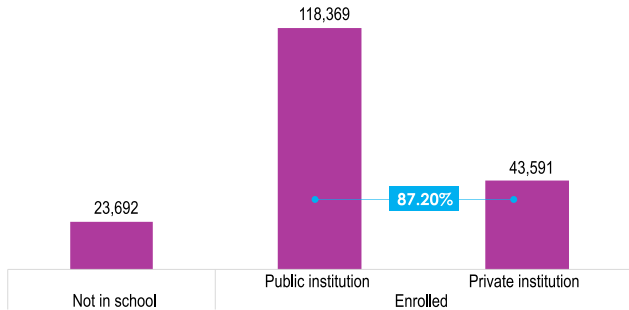
Nota: La localización de los centros Childcare y Pre-K es aleatoria dentro del municipio donde están ubicados



CHILDREN 0 TO 5 YEARS OF AGE CURRENTLY SERVED BY CHILDCARE OR PRESCHOOL CENTERS

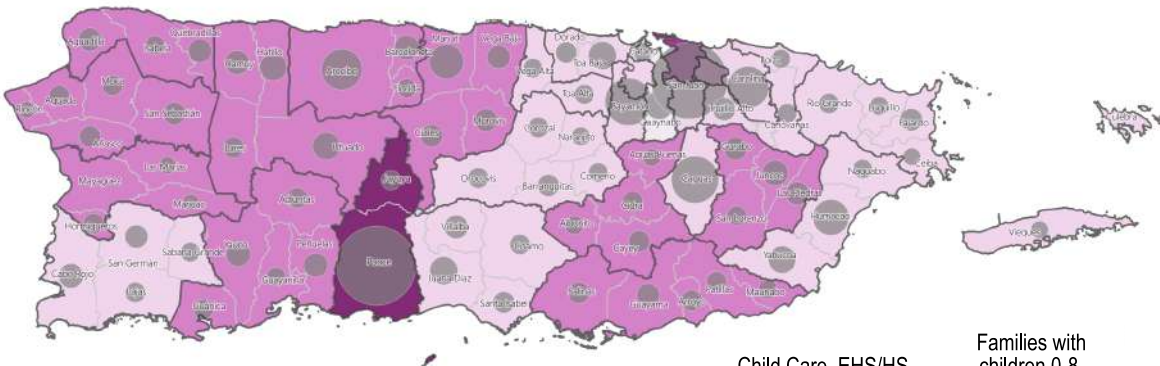


SCHOOL ENROLLEMENT OF CHILDREN 3 – 8 YEARS



Source: Study of the impact of Hurricane María in Puerto Rico's children, 2018

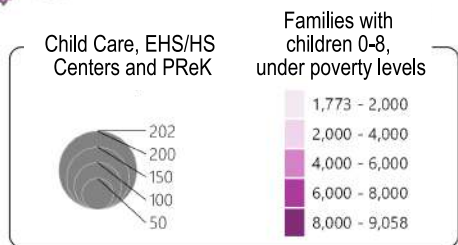
Source: American Community Survey, 2018



Map developed by Estudios Técnicos, Inc.

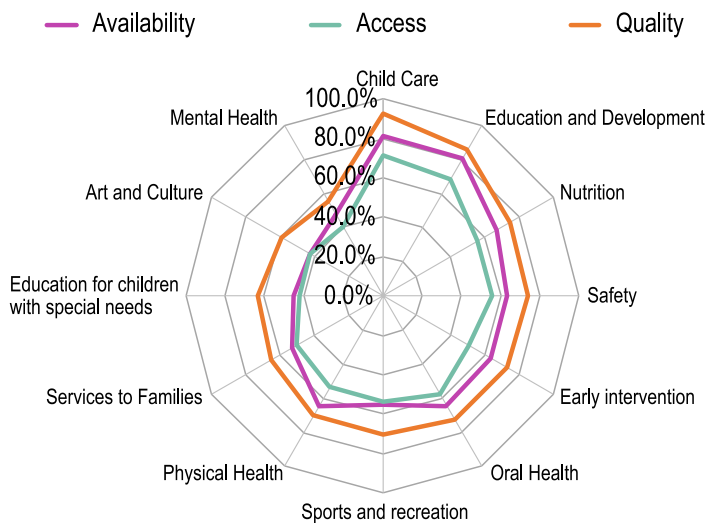
□ Puerto Rico Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs)

Fuente: ACS 1-Year Estimates – Puerto Rico Public Use Microdata Sample 2018



HOW DO THE DIFFERENT GROUPS CONSULTED DESCRIBE THE SYSTEM OF SERVICES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD?

SERVICE PROVIDERS



Service providers that participated in the survey understand that the major weaknesses of the ECSS are related to the availability, access, and quality of services in the areas of family services, special education, arts and culture, and mental health. In terms of factors that limit access to services, respondents mentioned mainly economic or cost barriers to services (54%), lack of knowledge about the availability of services (26.6%) and the availability of services itself (20.2%), and program eligibility criteria (12.9%). Factors that are understood to affect the quality of the services, include: economic barriers or the cost of quality services (38.9%), lack of knowledge on the part of the families about the availability of the services (12.6%) and the lack of funds from the perspective of the providers (13.7%).

OPINION LEADERS

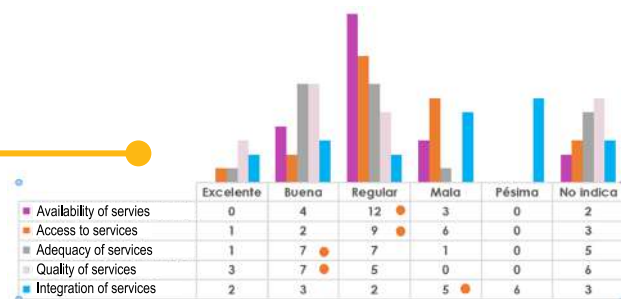
From the perspective of the opinion leaders interviewed, the main limitations associated with the service system are related to the availability, access and integration of the services, whose gaps have increased after the disasters/natural disasters that the country has gone through.

FAMILIES

ACCESS, AVAILABILITY AND QUALITY

- For many of the participants, the availability of a large part of the services is insufficient and within those available, they observe deficiencies in relation to equipment or personnel
- The need to have services available in non-traditional and after-school hours was highlighted
- The main services they mentioned as limited or lacking include Arts and Culture, Recreation and Sports, Health Professionals, Academic Tutoring Centers, Preschools, Housing, Western Area Prenatal Care Orientation
- In addition to limitations in the availability of services, regarding access to services participants identified:
 - Highly bureaucratic processes that delay obtaining the service in order to obtain them at the appropriate stage of development
 - Lack of continuity in the processes for the provision of services
 - High costs of services, including high health plan co-payments
 - Disproportionate number of staff to provide services compared to high demand
 - Lack of integration of services in terms of distance and communication, particularly when children require multiple ongoing services, for example, therapies
 - Poor promotion of available services and government agency pages with outdated information
- Participants, once they obtain the services, for the most part understand that they are adequate and of good quality

"Services, if you are able to find them, are of good quality"
-Quote from a participant of the focus groups (single mother).



S STRENGTH

- Human resources, professionals that are specialized and committed to children wellbeing and development
- Committed families
- Diversity in program alternatives
- Committed service providers with areas of specialization
- Academic Programs in Early Childhood

W WEAKNESS

- Policy implementation
- Fragmentation of efforts and systems
- Lack of uniform protocols (ex. quality criteria)
- Specific statistical data for the population and lack of integrated information systems
- Disruption in the continuity of services following disasters and the COVID-19 health emergency
- Program and service evaluation
- Emerging culture of research and evaluation
- Inequity in resource distribution
- Migration
- Duplication of Services
- Availability, integration, and access issues accentuated by disasters and the pandemic

O OPPORTUNITIES

- Enabling legal framework
- Sources of financing in the framework of the recovery
- Availability of technology
- Potential to create an information and accountability system
- Outreach and Education
- Creation of strategic alliances with non-profit entities, municipalities and government agencies

T THREATS

- Political situation and fiscal policies
- Loss of funds, weaknesses in fund management that limit access to new sources
- Population loss and migration
- Natural disasters, health emergencies and other external stressors
- Changes in the political environment and government administration
- Bureaucracy

CONCLUSIONS AND PRIORITY AREAS



BOYS/GIRLS AND THEIR FAMILIES //CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

The different sources and groups consulted identify the following needs or problems as the main ones related to early childhood and their families (in order of priority):

1. **Poverty/socioeconomic status of families** – According to the sources consulted for the purposes of the study, the problem of poverty and the socioeconomic condition of families with children of early age in Puerto Rico affects the different areas of child development and access to quality services to meet their needs and promote their full development. In the study, two aspects related to this need or problem are observed. First, it highlights the families with low income levels of poverty that - although it is understood that this is a phenomenon that affects the entire country - differences are observed in geographical terms and by subgroups of the population. Thus, higher levels of poverty are observed in families where the head of the household is a single mother, in families where there is a presence of children with functional diversity, and in families outside the metropolitan area. On the other hand, as a second strand of the discussion, the groups consulted are concerned with families of medium socioeconomic levels, who have been affected by disasters and the pandemic and who are limited in their ability to access or pay for services and who also do not qualify for subsidized programs from the local or federal government.
2. **Mental and emotional health needs of children and their families, particularly in the context of disasters and pandemics, and access to other health services.** Among the most frequently mentioned health services and specialties are: pediatricians, pediatric geneticists (in the context of early detection and screening), pediatric gastroenterologists, pediatric orthopedists, and mental health professionals.
3. **Access and Gaps in Services for Children with Functional Diversity and Special Needs**—According to the groups consulted, one of the subpopulations that has been most affected by past disasters and the pandemic and that has already been experiencing limitations in access to its services, are children with special needs. In particular, the consulted groups are concerned about the disruption of services, the failure to provide services at appropriate stages of development, changes in providers, and access to therapies and specialists in general.
4. **Child Care Services** – although there are different perspectives in this line, the groups consulted present care services as an area of need and highlight the lack of accessible services in economic terms for families who, although not living under poverty levels, their income is compromised. Likewise, it is presented as an issue where there are geographical differences. This can also be observed in the inventory of resources carried out for the purposes of this study.
5. **Low levels of knowledge about the availability of existing services** – the groups consulted highlighted as one of the main barriers to accessing services the lack of information about their availability, as well as the lack of education and guidance about early childhood and the services they should receive at different stages of their development. This situation has become more complex due to changes in the service system following hurricanes and the pandemic, and the lack of navigators or mechanisms to get families through the service system. Similarly, the groups consulted highlighted the need for greater knowledge about early childhood services and rights, in the context of the necessary empowerment of families.
6. **Access to other basic services**, such as housing, which has worsened after Hurricane María and the interruption in services after the pandemic. This type of service is concerned about its impact on the stability and well-being of minors.
7. **Nutrition Services** – the mentioned needs and issues related to nutrition also presented several aspects, including: the need to educate parents about healthy eating, access to food in the context of disasters and pandemic, and the decisions that families sometimes have to make regarding feeding their children due to lack of economic resources.
8. **Education services during pregnancy** – including prenatal care, parenting skills, preparation of environments for appropriate stimulation and developmental milestones.
9. **Access to other basic services**, such as housing, which has worsened after Hurricane María and the interruption in services after the pandemic. This type of service is concerned about its impact on the stability and well-being of minors.
10. **Lack of arts-related services** – according to the groups consulted, the arts play a very important role in early childhood development and may even be an important element of programs aimed at addressing childhood trauma due to the impact of recent events. In some of the consultations carried out, the scarce supply was discussed, much more so in the case of early childhood and special needs children. This can also be observed in the inventory of resources carried out for the purposes of this study.

The groups consulted, on the other hand, agree on the following populations as those most affected by these needs and problems

1. Children with special needs
2. Families in rural areas, and in the Central and Western regions of the Island (which coincides with the geographical analysis carried out for the purposes of this study)
3. Single parents
4. Families of medium socioeconomic level, who cannot access services that by design are directed to the population of scarce resources
5. Children in younger age (under 3 years old)

In the context of disasters and health emergencies that the Country has faced, the main challenges and concerns identified by the groups consulted are related to:

- the emotional challenges that families face and the lack of skills to handle the situation with their sons and daughters
- possible emotional trauma that children may face and its long-term impact
- that children do not receive services continuously and at the corresponding stage of development
- the need to train families in the use of parenting and education technology and practices to address gaps in existing services



SERVICE PROVISIONING SYSTEM

The main limitations related to the service provision system identified by the groups consulted are mainly associated with access, availability and integration of services, which has been accentuated following the natural disasters and health emergency faced by Puerto Rico in recent years.

The services where it is understood that the main limitations and gaps exist are those associated with:

- mental health of children and their families,
- education and special needs,
- general educational services
- other health-related services
- art and culture
- recreation sports.

The main barriers perceived in the access and availability of services are related to:

- decrease in supply/provision and mode of services due to disasters and the pandemic
- migration or flight of talent
- lack of specialized staff and equipment
- Lack of knowledge by families about available services,
- family situations (cost, transportation, care of other children)
- lack of family service browsers/navegadores
- lack of sources of information on available services and how they have changed after disasters and the pandemic

Regarding the integration of services, the groups consulted agree on the following barriers and limitations:

- characteristics of the institutions themselves that do not encourage collaboration or coordination (bureaucracy, lack of culture towards collaboration, competition for resources or funds, among others)
- lack of incentives for collaboration
- lack of uniform protocols, models and languages in the provision of services
- lack of knowledge of families and providers about available services
- lack of financial and human resources to implement coordination efforts
- communication problem with the family and among providers that has been accentuated in the wake of disasters and the pandemic
- Lack of specific statistics and uniform and integrated information systems

Regarding the quality of services, the groups agree that qualified and trained personnel is essential. However, they do not agree on the availability and adequacy of training opportunities for such personnel. In addition, they highlighted the shortage of professionals in the more traditional early childhood service areas, as well as the new need for personnel prepared to deal with the emotional problems associated with disasters. The services required by children and their families stand out in these areas.



INSTITUTIONAL AND PUBLIC POLICY FRAMEWORK

Regarding the institutional and public policy framework, the groups consulted agree that beyond a lack of public policy instruments, the difficulty lies in:

- the fragmentation of that policy and regulatory framework
- limitations on the implementation of existing laws and regulations
- restrictive ways of interpreting federal legislation or regulations, of programs that represent important sources of funding for program implementation.

For most of the people consulted, it was difficult to identify areas where legislation would not have been tangent in early childhood. However, they were unable to identify specific policies related to children in the context of disasters and public health emergencies.

In terms of recommendations, several of the groups consulted raised the need for:

- Disseminate information on this needs assessment,
- To have a multisectoral group, committee or council to lead public policy processes on the issue
- Inclusive Public Policy Statement
- Incorporate collaborative mechanisms and incentives into the legal framework
- Encourage and incorporate management measurement and evaluation requirement



Llevado a cabo por:

