In keeping with the overall objectives of this report, in this section we review the structural causes of Puerto Rican migration to Chicago. We also seek to connect the Chicago experience to larger discussions about the Puerto Rican diaspora. Finally, we recognize the community activism connected to the growth and maturation of the Puerto Rican community. This section draws from the broad body of social science literature produced by academics, many of whom have contributed extensively to the study of Puerto Ricans in Chicago.

Puerto Rico: Political and Socioeconomic Context of Migrations

Throughout much of the twentieth century and into the present, complex political, economic, social, and cultural dynamics have stimulated mass Puerto Rican migration to the United States. Although there is evidence to suggest that Puerto Ricans migrated to the United States during Spanish colonial rule (Whalen, 2005), the undisputed consensus from decades of scholarly research is that Puerto Rican migration to the United States has been a fairly continuous process, with peaks and return movements at particular points in time. Today, it is difficult to find a Puerto Rican who has not been touched by migration, either directly or indirectly. Of the nine million who define themselves as Puerto Rican, over 56 percent live outside Puerto Rico—están afuera, as the term goes—but many move back and forth between the Island and U.S. communities (Census, 2010). Underlying the mass migrations of Puerto Ricans is the U.S. colonization of Puerto Rico, which began with the Spanish-American War of 1898. Existing scholarship (Melendez and Melendez, 1993; Grosfoguel, 2003; Whalen and Vazquez-Hernandez, 2005) has documented how U.S. colonial rule helped to create the social and economic conditions that propelled Puerto Ricans into a multiplicity of migrations, including those to Chicago in the middle decades of the previous century. Historically, Puerto Rican migration has been primarily a working class phenomenon. This group has been most severely affected by the reorganization of Puerto Rico’s economy as demanded by new colonial exigencies. By the first two decades of the twentieth century, the U.S. had managed to monopolize agricultural production—sugar, tobacco, and coffee—to generate high profits for U.S. corporations. The landless rural proletariat that emerged in the first 20 years of U.S. colonization survived by migrating internally as seasonal employment became available. Poor and working class Puerto Rican families felt the brunt of these changes in profound ways. Subsistence employment stripped men of needed wages and shaped women’s employment patterns (Azize, 1987; Acevedo, 1993; Ortiz, 1996). Poor and working class women became integrated into a sex-segregated labor market that closely related to the needs of U.S. colonial capitalism (Toro-Morn, 2001; Ortiz, 1996). During the first three decades of the twentieth century, women worked as tobacco strippers, home needle workers, and makers of straw hats, work that was an extension of their reproductive roles in the home.
In the 1950s and 60s, the colonially imposed economic program, Operation Bootstrap (Operacion Manos a la Obra), led to the largest migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States (Padilla, 1987; Alicea, 1997; Toro-Morn, 1993). Operation Bootstrap reconfigured economic life in Puerto Rico by attracting outside capital and jobs to the Island in the name of improving the standard of living of Puerto Ricans. Incentives such as tax exemptions, subsidized factory space, and lax environmental laws were given to private concerns to lure capital to the Island. As part of a Cold War strategy, the United States government projected Puerto Rico as the “showcase” of the Caribbean, tempting other countries in the hemisphere to follow Puerto Rico’s example of free enterprise capitalism (the precursor to contemporary neoliberal economics). Yet, it is well known today that alongside high levels of economic growth, there were also high levels of unemployment on the Island. This contradiction was noted by the Puerto Rican and American architects of Operation Bootstrap who attempted to resolve it through government sponsored migration (Toro-Morn, 1999).

Feminist scholars have also noted an additional contradiction inherent in the export-processing model underlying Operation Bootstrap. The program was designed to improve the employment opportunities of men, yet the kinds of industry attracted to the Island (i.e., export oriented manufacturing) resulted in a strong demand for women workers (Rios, 1990; Safa, 1995). While the industrialization program incorporated women as workers, the surplus labor (i.e., mostly men) was absorbed into the U.S. labor market via migration. In fact, these pressures to migrate coincided with the growing need for cheap labor in urban centers throughout the United States.

Immediately following the Spanish-American war, but intensifying in the post-WWII period, Puerto Ricans were heavily recruited laborers. Historian Carmen Whalen (2005:20) reports that in 1920, the American Manufacturing Company, a rope factory in Brooklyn, recruited 130 Puerto Rican women. In 1926, more than 1,000 families were also recruited to work in Arizona with promises of abundant work. The first group of Puerto Rican workers that migrated to Chicago in the 1940s was recruited by a local employment agency. This complicated history, which we have only sketched, contributed to the formation of the Puerto Rican diaspora and its specific manifestation in Chicago.

CHICAGO AND THE PUERTO RICAN DIASPORA

Chicago occupies an important place in the larger history of global migrations as a destination point for immigrants. At the turn of the twentieth century, the city of “big shoulders,” welcomed hard-working European immigrants to crowded meat-packing factories. Two decades later, African Americans migrated north searching for work opportunities and a “piece of the pie.” Around the same time, Mexican immigrants were lured to the city with similar promises. In the mid-decades of the twentieth century, Puerto Ricans began to arrive to work in the declining industrial sector of the city, followed by newer immigrants from Mexico, and other parts of Central and South America. The later arrivals were quickly absorbed by the new political economy of post-industrial, service sector jobs.

This ethno-racial history of immigration, labor, and community life can be seen in the physical landscape of the city as one drives west from Michigan Avenue along Division Street. At Milwaukee and Division, a reminder of that history has been inscribed in the Nelson Algreen fountain: “For the masses who do the city’s labor and also keep the city’s heart.” Driving west along Division Street away from the tourist and commercial attractions of Michigan Avenue, a complex story of migration, political activism, and community development emerges from the landscape. Crossing Western Avenue, a graceful, fifty-ton steel Puerto Rican flag spans the street and marks the beginning of what is now known as Paseo Boricua, the heart of the Puerto Rican community in Chicago. One mile later, a companion flag establishes a beachhead—“¡Aquí luchamos! ¡Aquí nos quedamos!, 1966-1996”—an encapsulation of the gritty history of Puerto Rican migration to and within the city.
The first scholarly study of Puerto Rican migration to Chicago, conducted by Elena Padilla, a student at the University of Chicago, studied their arrival. Men came to work in the steel mills and women came to work as domestics. Contracted workers were dissatisfied with the wages and working conditions and many abandoned their contracts in search of other work. In keeping with the Chicago School of urban community studies, Padilla also documents the settlement patterns of the early Puerto Rican migrants to the city. Many moved in with Mexican friends and neighbors in transient hotels on South Clark and State Streets in the Loop, thus placing in historical context the long-term relationships that have existed between Mexican and Puerto Ricans in the city of Chicago. The recruitment of Puerto Rican men and women to do contract work in Chicago became known as the “Chicago experiment” and government officials used it as a way to rationalize the movement of Puerto Rican men and women to other parts of the United States (Toro-Morn, 2005).

In the 1950’s and 1960’s news about employment opportunities in Chicago spread fast among immigrant networks and very quickly Chicago became an important place of settlement for working class families. By 1960, Chicago was home to 32,371 Puerto Ricans. Ten years later, there were approximately 73,000 Puerto Ricans living in the city. By the 1980s, the number had grown to 112,074. By then, Chicago’s reputation as the second largest Puerto Rican community in the United States was well established. We know that Puerto Rican men and women migrated to the city as families. Drawing from interviews, Toro-Morn (1995) found that Puerto Ricans moved to Chicago in stages. Husbands came first, to secure employment and housing arrangements, and then sent for the rest of the family. Some women came as “brides-to-be” and joined their future husbands in the city. Toro-Morn (2005) argues that even within the constraints of a deeply patriarchal culture, Puerto Rican women used migration as a way to escape gender oppression. Research conducted for this project continues to bear witness to the role of family members in facilitating the migration process and the pull of community as a source of support. Toro-Morn (1995) reports that in the 1980s, professional and educated Puerto Ricans were recruited to work in the city.

Anthropologist Gina Perez (2004), reminds us that initially local newspapers in Chicago represented Puerto Ricans as a “model minority.” As she writes (2004:73), “by the late 1950s and 1960s, Chicago media consistently praised its Puerto Rican residents for their strong families.” One newspaper article profiled a local family, the Medinas, by highlighting how their social life centers around the family and helping other newcomers adapt to city life. The Mayor’s Office and its agencies focused on the Puerto Rican family as model urban family, earning comparisons with European immigrant families. There were problems in the “ghetto” such as overcrowding, language difficulties, and unemployment, but “Puerto Rican families were stable and organized in the ‘Spanish tradition’ (2004:74).” The Office of the Government of Puerto Rico Migration Division helped maintain this view of Puerto Ricans through public relations campaigns. In another light, the Migration Division also had the added responsibility of collecting data about the discrimination and mistreatment faced by Puerto Ricans in Chicago. Later on, the Division Street Riot—a pivotal moment—shattered the model minority image. (The Division Street Riot is discussed below.)

Research on the Chicago Puerto Rican experience has helped to document the struggles Puerto Ricans have faced: as workers (Toro-Morn, 2001); with gentrification (Alicea, 2001; Rinaldo 2002); in regard to inter-Latino relations (Rua, 2011; Perez, 2003; Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2010); and for the symbolic
and political importance of Paseo Boricua as a community space (Flores-Gonzalez, 2001; Rinaldo, 2002). Though Puerto Ricans have settled in numerous parts of the city, Humboldt Park/West Town emerged in the 1960s as the center of community life. Here, Puerto Ricans have established Puerto Rican-focused businesses, organizations, and cultural festivals, which remain significant despite considerable displacement from the community over the past two decades. To understand these developments, it is necessary to examine the role of activism and community-building initiatives in Chicago’s Puerto Rican community.

**PUERTO RICAN ACTIVISM AND COMMUNITY BUILDING**

Puerto Rican activism in Chicago can be traced back to the political and cultural atmosphere that Puerto Ricans confronted when they migrated to the United States beginning in the late 1940s. Although Puerto Rico was politically and economically tied to the country of their migration, they inhabited a foreign land with a foreign language and foreign customs. Many of the migrants found much hostility and racism when they arrived and as such began developing survival and resistance mechanisms in order to navigate the turbulent waters of the racist society in which they now found themselves. Puerto Ricans experienced sub-standard housing, housing discrimination, police brutality, sub-par education, and displacement.

On June 12, 1966—as Puerto Ricans were celebrating the first Puerto Rican day parade in Chicago—an incident of police brutality against a young Puerto Rican man sparked a three-day rebellion in West Town/Humboldt Park, known now as the “Division Street Riots.” Many activists emerged from this riot to continue the struggle for fair housing, education, and other community issues tied not only to local struggles, but also to the situation in Puerto Rico. Of course, their newfound political consciousness was brought about not only because of their day-to-day situation and the colonial reality of Puerto Rico, but also the broader political upheaval of the 1960s, which witnessed the civil rights and Black Power movements and anti-colonial third world struggles.

Following the Riots, Puerto Rican residents and leaders fought for the creation of the community-oriented Roberto Clemente High School. They also carried out struggles for better and affordable housing, public housing access for Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, bilingual education, and employment access. They organized against police brutality and gentrification and countless other issues that directly affect the community. This activism gave birth to Puerto Rican political representatives serving at all levels of government: federal, state, county, and city as well as appointments of key Puerto Ricans to various agencies within government.

Years later, in the Lincoln Park area, the Young Lords were founded in Chicago, later spreading to New York and the Northeast. Gina Perez (2004) documents that the Young Lords protested the City’s urban renewal plan which displaced Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and poor Appalachian whites from Lincoln Park. In 1960, they took control of the Armitage Street Methodist Church, renamed the People’s Church. From this facility, the Young Lords offered community members needed services such as child care and free health care, as well as establishing a cultural center and newspaper. By the late 1970s the organization weakened considerably, but many of its leaders stayed involved in other community groups.

In Humboldt Park, the Riots led to the formation of a new generation of grassroots organizations, such as the Spanish Action Committee of Chicago, the Latin American Defense Organization, Spanish Coalition for Housing, Segundo Ruiz Belvis Cultural Center, the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Puerto Rican High School, and ASPIRA of Illinois. In the decades that followed, other Puerto Rican-based organizations formed, including the Division Street Business Development Association, the Puerto Rican Parade Committee, Puerto Rican Chamber of Commerce, the Puerto Rican Arts Alliance, and, most recently, the Institute for Puerto Rican Arts and Culture.
Puerto Rican activism in Chicago, however, was not limited to barrio concerns. Rather, Chicago Puerto Ricans have been active in many of the defining issues of the broader Puerto Rican diaspora. For instance, Puerto Ricans in Chicago were at the forefront of securing the release not only of the Puerto Rican Nationalists in the 1970s, but also most of the Puerto Rican political prisoners in 1999. Puerto Rican Chicago’s own Congressman Luis Gutierrez was instrumental in pressuring the US Navy to leave Vieques, Puerto Rico in 2003, after over 60 years of abusive military practices.

At the same time, Puerto Ricans have participated in broader social justice movements. From the Young Lords’ involvement in the original Rainbow Coalition to the movement for immigration reform, Puerto Ricans have been active in causes greater than those that serve their community alone. Some of the most prominent voices for immigration reform in the nation are Puerto Ricans from Chicago. Elvira Arrellano, a young undocumented single mother, took sanctuary to resist her deportation proceedings at a Methodist church in the heart of Paseo Boricua, where she was supported by the local community. Puerto Rican organizations have also supported LGBTQ issues, access to education, housing, employment and other issues that not only impact them but also impact other communities. In short, they have worked in solidarity with diverse communities across the city, country, and world.

In recent years, Puerto Rican activism has once again focused on the issue of displacement and gentrification. In 1995, under the leadership of former 26th Alderman Billy Ocasio, Paseo Boricua’s two massive steel flags were erected. In the eyes of many community leaders we talked to as part of this research, Paseo Boricua represents an important “logro” (success) for Puerto Ricans in Chicago. It is viewed as evidence of the struggle and desire for community in Chicago. As one community leader put it, “one of our major assets is that we’ve learned how to do community building and we’ve done it ourselves.” Although our research suggests that many Puerto Ricans have moved away from the area that is commonly identified as the “heart of the community,” Paseo, nevertheless, continues to function as a “home.” It also functions as a set of rhetorical maneuvers aggressively claiming space against outside developers and gentrifiers who do not wish to build affordable housing for community residents or who do not value Puerto Rican themes. All in all, Paseo and its related initiatives are, indeed, spectacular successes, but underneath the surface there are numerous fragilities and ironies, for it has not been easy for these under-funded activists to shape a politics and economics that fight other visions of what the city and these specific neighborhoods ought to be. In short this report hopes to capture some of this complex story.
1950s – Early settlements of Puerto Ricans during this time are found near Madison and Clark streets, including near and within the Cabrini Green homes.

1955-1960 – The construction of the Carl Sandburg Village destroys completely the Puerto Rican communities of La Madison and La Clark, displacing tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans. Puerto Ricans start moving into Lincoln Park and Wicker Park. The Caballeros de San Juan and Damas de Maria form church councils in order to address the needs of the growing Puerto Rican community.

1960-1965 – Poverty, lack of supervised youth programs and the destabilization of neighborhood support networks caused by Urban Renewal turns many youth clubs into hardcore street gangs.

1966 – On June 12, 1966, as Puerto Ricans celebrate the first Fiestas Puertorriqueñas in Chicago, an incident of police brutality against a young Puerto Rican man ignites a three day rebellion, now known as the Division Street Riots.

1970s – Puerto Ricans parents and community leaders fight for the establishment of Roberto Clemente High School at the corner of Division and Western in 1974.

1980s – Harold Washington, first African American Mayor of the City, is elected. This leads to many Latino political appointments, including the creation of Luis Gutierrez’s aldermanic position in 1986. In 1987, Miguel Del Valle is elected the first Latino Senator in the Illinois General Assembly. He goes on to become the first Latino to hold the position of Assistant Majority Leader in the Illinois Senate.

1990s – The Puerto Rican community starts to increase in Logan Square, Belmont Cragin, and Hermosa, while also decreasing in West Town due to encroaching gentrification.

1993 – After years of struggle with the City of Chicago, the flags of Paseo Boricua are erected on Division Street. Billy Ocasio is appointed 26th Ward alderman by Mayor Richard M. Daley to fill the unexpired term of Luis Gutierrez, who was elected congressman.

1999 – Puerto Ricans in Chicago, leaders of the longtime struggle for the release of Puerto Rican Independence Political Prisoners, are instrumental in the 1999 release of 11 prisoners.

2003 – Puerto Rican Chicago’s own Congressman Luis Gutierrez is instrumental in pressuring the US Navy to finally leave Vieques, Puerto Rico in 2003 after over 60 years of military practices that included the use of toxic chemicals.

2012 – The Institute of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture was designated as a Museum in the Park, the first national Puerto Rican museum on the mainland United States.