

**‘They think we wear loincloths’: Spatial Stigma, Coloniality, and Physician migration in Puerto Rico (In press at *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*)**

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## Abstract

Puerto Rico (PR) is facing an unprecedented healthcare crisis due to accelerating migration of physicians to the mainland United States (US), leaving residents with diminishing healthcare and excessively long provider wait times. While scholars and journalists have identified economic factors driving physician migration, our study analyzes the effects of spatial stigma within the broader context of coloniality as unexamined dimensions of physician loss. Drawing on 50 semi-structured interviews with physicians throughout PR and the US, we identified how stigmatizing meanings are attached to PR, its people, and its biomedical system, often incorporating colonial notions of the island's presumed backwardness, lagging medical technology, and lack of cutting-edge career opportunities. We conclude that in addition to economically motivated policies, efforts to curb physician migration should also address globally circulating ideas about PR, acknowledge their roots in coloniality, and valorize local responses to the crisis that are in danger of being lost to history.

**Keywords:** Medical migration; colonial biomedicine; stigma of place; healthcare systems; Caribbean



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## Highlights

- Data from the Puerto Rico College of Physicians and Surgeons (PRCPS) indicates that 365-500 physicians have left PR every year since 2014.
- Globally circulating meanings about PR, its biomedical infrastructure, or its practitioners may drive, exacerbate, and inform physician migration from the island.
- We emphasize qualitative data from in-depth semi-structured interviews with physicians.
- Economic factors are undeniable in physician migration decision-making. However, *spatial stigma* is another understudied phenomenon that can push physicians to leave.
- Our results posit that spatial stigma emerges in three common ways among physicians:
  1. Ideas about Puerto Rican medicine being inferior, often recalling colonial metaphors.
  2. Stigma can become internalized by Puerto Rican physicians.
  3. Migration can be perceived as necessary to remain at the vanguard of the physician profession.
- In addition to focusing primarily on economic incentives, we recommend decolonial approaches to help physicians remain in or return to Puerto Rico:
  1. Create campaigns to counter dominant narratives that construct PR or Puerto Rican medicine as inferior or backward.
  2. Give US-based physicians opportunities to interact professionally with physicians and patient groups in Puerto Rico.
  3. Address stigmatizing notions of Puerto Rico, Puerto Rican physicians, and Puerto Rican medicine and physician experiences of stigmatization in public forums.



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