



Amidst Battle for Paradise, Residents of Puerto Rico Worry About Losing Home

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Overview

This report draws on data collected by El Laboratorio de Opinión Pública de Puerto Rico (Puerto Rican Public Opinion Lab or PR-POL) and an online survey of residents of Puerto Rico through TGM Research to offer new insights on concerns about displacement in Puerto Rico and residents' priorities moving forward.¹ The PR-POL sample includes the views of 1,284 residents of Puerto Rico who completed the survey between May 2025 and November 2025. Weights were applied to reflect the demographics of Puerto Rico as a whole. In addition to PR-POL's survey, the report uses data from a recent online survey fielded by the firm TGM Research from February 25, 2026, to March 10, 2026, which captures the views of 660 residents of Puerto Rico across different regions in the main island.² The report finds that Puerto Rico residents are deeply concerned about threats to land and housing access, and they want their government to address those concerns rather than prioritize tourism development and foreign investment.

Introduction

Puerto Rico – the largest and most populated territory of the United States – is often thought of as an island paradise with pristine beaches and vibrant culture. In fact, 2025 marked the fifth consecutive year it surpassed its own tourism records.³ However, in contrast to the rising influx of visitors, trends show an alarming decrease in Puerto Rico's resident population. From 2016 to 2025, the territory lost approximately 295,497 residents, around 9% of its 2016 population.⁴ Furthermore, for those still in Puerto Rico, housing has become increasingly inaccessible. The average cost of single-family housing increased around 68% in the past decade,⁵ while 37% of the population is still under the poverty line.⁶

Against this backdrop, laws and projects that prioritize outside investors and tourists over local residents have been a point of contention. In the past decade, several legislative initiatives have drawn particular scrutiny from multiple sectors of the population: Act 60 offers tax exemptions to foreign investors, PR House Bill 25 (PC 25) restricts public coastal land, and PR House Bill 862 aimed to reduce local residents' influence over construction and development projects before it was withdrawn. The recently approved Law 82-2026 (previously known as PC 310) requires anyone seeking to legally challenge and halt an approved construction project to post a bond equivalent to 10% of the project's total value.

One highly contested construction project is Esencia, a luxury development in the southwestern town of Cabo Rojo. The government approved about \$497 million in tax exemptions for the project, which would build multimillion-dollar housing units and hotels across more than 1,500 acres of land.⁷

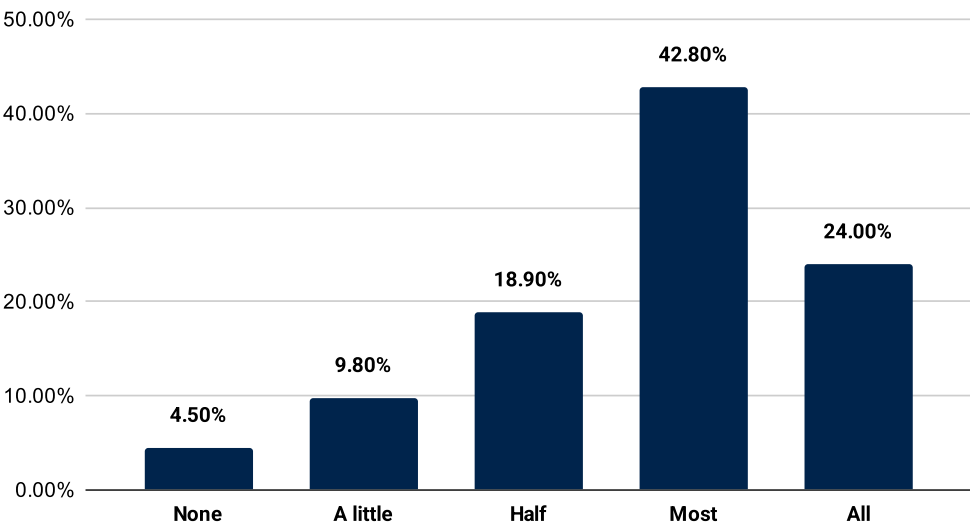


Experts, including the environmental and natural resource agency of Puerto Rico, have highlighted the risks presented by this project to the local environment and water supply.⁸ On March 28, thousands of people from across the archipelago marched against Esencia in the capital of San Juan in a national protest organized by approximately 70 organizations.⁹

There has been limited data assessing residents' concerns about displacement and gentrification in Puerto Rico. This report uses both a representative survey of Puerto Rico fielded in 2025 and a more recent online survey fielded in 2026 to shed insights on how residents are perceiving these changes and what they would prefer their government to focus on moving forward.

Figure 1. Expected Land and Property Loss to U.S. Mainlanders

% of residents who say that U.S. mainlanders will own ____ land and property in Puerto Rico in the next 50 years.



Source: Laboratorio Puertorriqueño de Opinión Pública, 2025

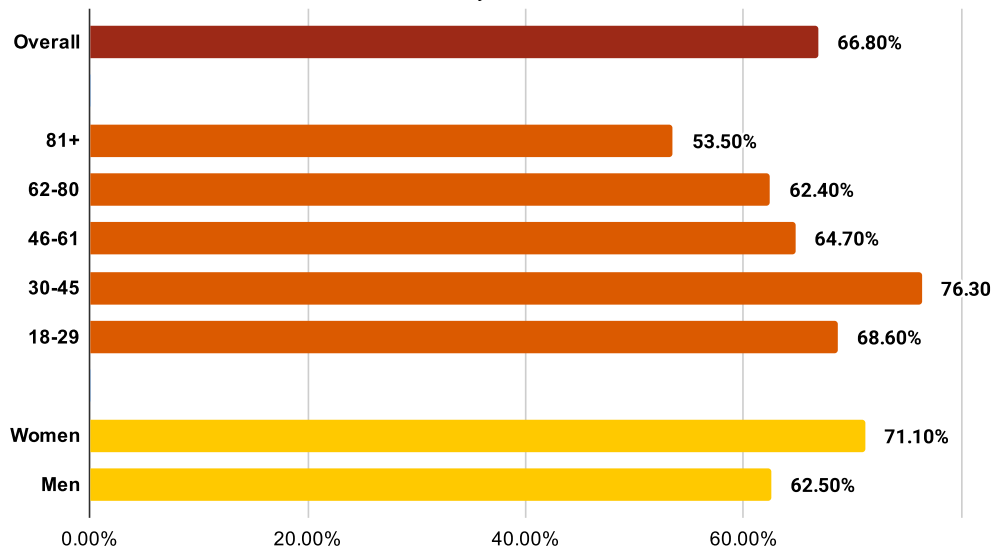
The Vast Majority of Residents of Puerto Rico Believe That U.S. Mainlanders Will Own Most or All Land in Puerto Rico in the Next 50 Years

- Over 2/3 of Puerto Rico residents (66.8%) think that U.S. mainlanders will own most or all land in Puerto Rico in the next 50 years.¹⁰
- Almost one-fifth (18.9%) of residents think that U.S. mainlanders will own half of land in Puerto Rico in the next 50 years. Together this means that over 85% of residents of Puerto Rico think that U.S. mainlanders will own half or more of all land in Puerto Rico in the next 50 years.
- Around 15% of residents of Puerto Rico (14.3%) think that U.S. mainlanders would own a little or none.



Figure 2. Expected Land and Property Loss to U.S. Mainlanders, by Age and Gender

% of residents who say that U.S. mainlanders will own most or all land and property in Puerto Rico in the next 50 years.



Source: Laboratorio Puertorriqueño de Opinión Pública, 2025

Perceptions That U.S. Mainlanders Would Own Most or All Land Was Most Prevalent Among Younger Residents (45 Years or Younger) and Women

- Over three-quarters of residents aged 30 to 45 (76.3%) think that U.S. mainlanders will own most or all land in Puerto Rico in the next 50 years, compared to those 81 years or older, where only about half (53.5%) believe this.
- Women (71.1%) are more likely to believe that U.S. mainlanders will own most or all land in Puerto Rico in the next 50 years compared to men (62.5%).
- While the perceptions that U.S. mainlanders would own most or all land and property in the next 50 years were dominant across the archipelago, there are 11 municipalities where residents voice this at a rate of 75% or more.¹¹ These perceptions are also most notable in Senatorial District II (comprising Toa Alta, Cataño, Carolina and Bayamón), where 75.7% of residents think that U.S. mainlanders would own most or all land and property in Puerto Rico in the next 50 years.

Figure 3. Expected Land and Property Loss to U.S. Mainlanders, by Senatorial District

% of residents who say that U.S. mainlanders will own most or all land and property in Puerto Rico in the next 50 years.

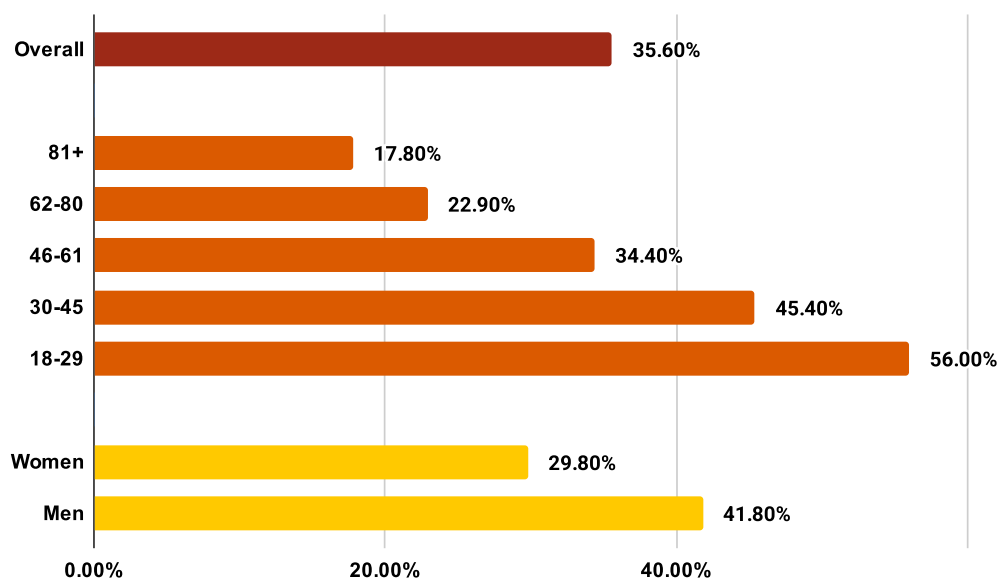


Many Residents of Puerto Rico Considered Moving to the United States in the Past Year, and These Considerations Are Most Prevalent Among Younger Respondents

- More than one-third (35.6%) of residents considered moving to the United States in the past year, and Millennial and Gen Z cohorts were much more likely to consider the option. For example, 45.4% of Millennials (aged 30 to 45 years) and 56% of Gen Z (aged 18 to 29 years) considered moving to the United States.
- Men (41.8%) are more likely than women (29.8%) to have considered moving to the United States.

Figure 4. Considered Moving to the United States

% of residents who said that they considered moving to the United States in the past year.



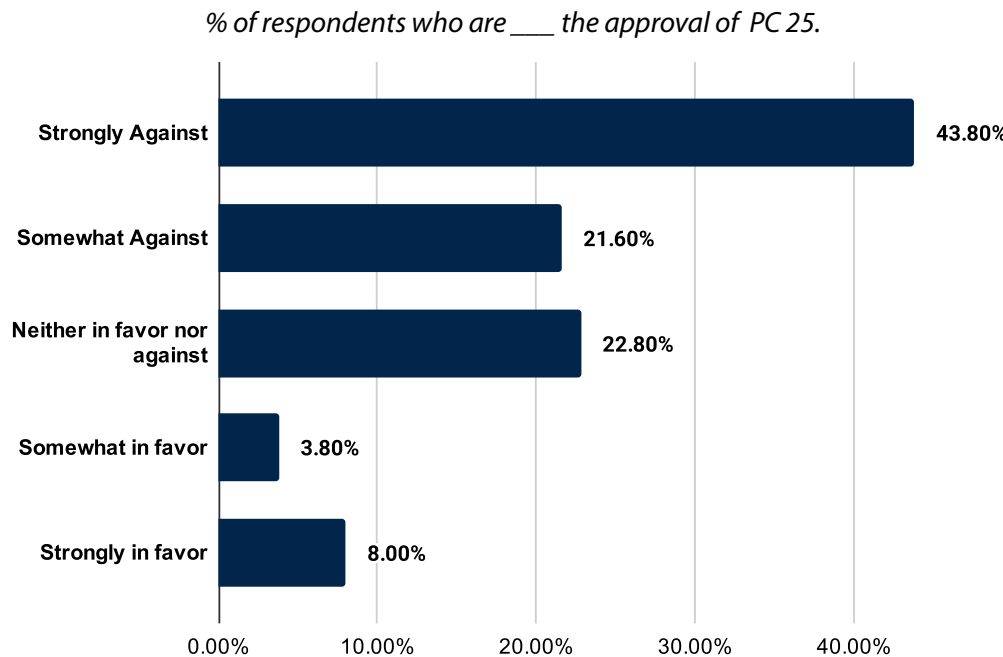
Source: Laboratorio Puertorriqueño de Opinión Pública, 2025

There Is Strong Opposition to Legislation That Would Restrict Access to Public Coastline

- Puerto Rico's House Bill 25 (PC 25) seeks to reduce the Maritime-Terrestrial Zone, which is currently public coastal land reached by tides and waves of tropical cyclones. Puerto Rico's House of Representatives passed the bill, which is currently in Puerto Rico's Senate Natural Resources Committee.
- In an online survey of 660 residents of Puerto Rico fielded between February and March 2026, almost two-thirds of respondents (65.4%) opposed passing PC25, which would reduce the areas of coastlines and beaches that are considered public and freely accessible.
- Only 11.8% of respondents approved passing the legislation.



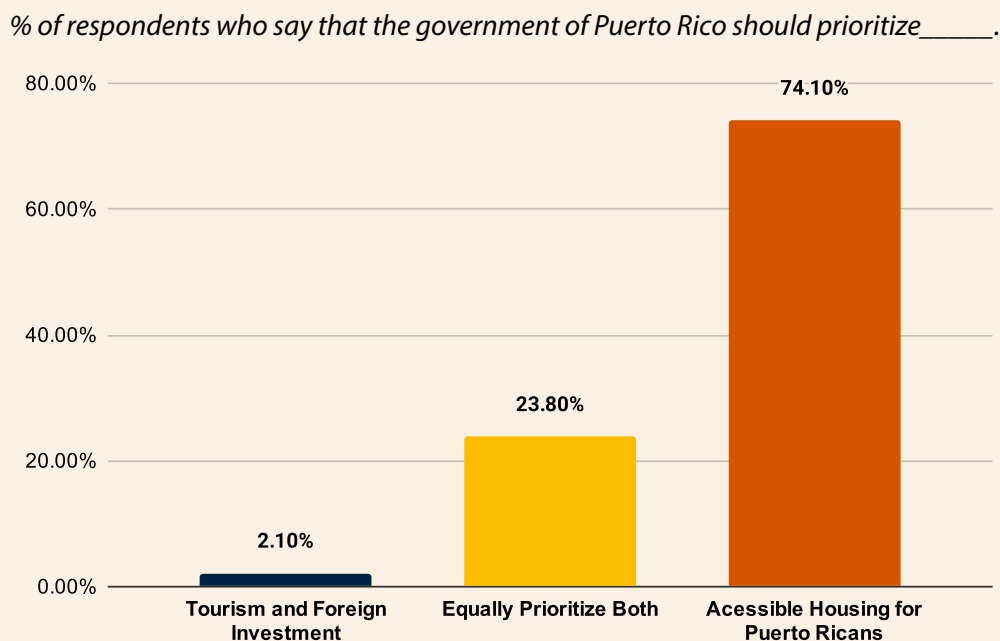
Figure 5. Attitudes toward legislation to reduce the areas of coastlines and beaches (PC 25)¹²



Residents Would Rather the Government Prioritize Access to Affordable Housing Than Tourism and Foreign Investment

- Nearly three-quarters of Puerto Rican respondents (74.1%) said they would rather the government prioritize Puerto Ricans' access to affordable housing, compared to around 2% who thought the government should prioritize tourism and foreign investment (2.1%). Nearly one-quarter thought they should give equal priority to both (23.8%).

Figure 6. Resident Priorities



Conclusion

The findings in this report demonstrate that concerns about displacement or gentrification are highly salient among residents of Puerto Rico, who have limited federal representation and limited sovereignty. This concern is especially high among younger residents, who are also the most likely to consider moving to the United States. The recent online survey also indicates strong public opposition to a legislative proposal that would reduce public access to coastlines and broad support for prioritizing affordable housing over tourism and foreign investment.

Biography

Ignangeli Salinas-Muñiz is a fellow at the University of Michigan's Center for Racial Justice and a doctoral candidate in the U-M political science department. Her research examines subnational access to democracy in the United States, with a particular focus on the United States territories.

Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

- 1 PR-POL collected data through a stratified three-stage area probability sample of $n = 6,483$ households in Puerto Rico, where both households and residents within households had equal probability of selection.
- 2 In the TGM survey, 559 out of 660 respondents identified which town they were from. The percentage of respondents from each senatorial district is as follows: (I) 13.41%, (II) 4.29%, (III) 11.80%, (IV) 15.56%, (V) 18.43%, (VI) 11.63%, (VII) 14.31%, and (VIII) 10.56%
- 3 Discover Puerto Rico. (2026, January 22). El 2025 se consagra como el quinto año récord en el turismo puertorriqueño. discoverpuertorico.com
- 4 U.S. Census Bureau. 2010–2020 Intercensal Estimates for Puerto Rico; U.S. Census Bureau. (2025). Population Estimates.
- 5 Changes according to the Purchase-Only Federal Housing Finance Agency House Price Index for Puerto Rico between 2015 Q4 and 2025 Q4. <https://www.fhfa.gov/data/hpi/datasets?tab=quarterly-data>
- 6 U.S. Census Bureau. (2025). Population Estimates. Income and Poverty.
- 7 Méndez González, L.J. (2025, October 14). Esencia residential project receives tax breaks in Puerto Rico. *Centro de Periodismo Investigativo*.
- 8 Méndez González, L.J. (2025, June 26). Esencia project could cause environmental damage in Puerto Rico. *Centro de Periodismo Investigativo*; WAPA Digital. (2026, March 27). Informe DRNA reafirma “esencia” causar impacto directo e inevitable en hábitats. (2026, March 27). *Noticentro*.
- 9 Meléndez, K. (2026, May 20). “Esencia no va”: Miles de personas protestan en Viejo San Juan contra proyecto en Cabo Rojo. *I.*
- 10 In an online survey of 660 residents of Puerto Rico fielded between February and March 2026, 76.24% stated they were concerned a lot or a very great deal about losing lands and property to wealthy foreigners and U.S. mainlanders.
- 11 Bayamón, Ciales, Carolina, Juncos, Moca, Peñuelas, Río Grande, Toa Baja, Vega Alta, Vega Baja, and Villalba.
- 12 Question Wording: PC25 is a legislative bill that reduces the coastal and beach areas considered public and open to free access. Are you in favor of or opposed to the approval of PC25?

