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The US Congress Healthcare Discrimination Towards Puerto Rico Costs Lives

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by **Francisco Rodríguez-Castro**
frc@birlingcapital.com

The U.S. and Puerto Rico ecosystems continue to face unprecedented increases in health costs, impacting consumer spending and reducing economic growth.

A Comparative Analysis of Healthcare Costs in the United States and Puerto Rico examines the contrasting healthcare costs between the United States and Puerto Rico, shedding light on the disparities stemming from the allocation of funds by the U.S. Congress. One of the biggest problems in Puerto Rico is that the most significant percentage of health spending arises because people do not take care of their health conditions on time. When they go to the health centers, their conditions are so critical that the cost of treating them is in the millions. For example, 2% to 3% of patients consume 80% of medical budgets. There is a need to focus on chronic diseases: diabetes is the most expensive condition in Puerto Rico due to genetic and dietary reasons.

While the United States spends approximately \$13,000 per person or \$4.3 trillion on healthcare, Puerto Rico receives a significantly lower allocation of \$4,000 per capita. This discrepancy represents a 69% disparity, resulting in an annual lack of funding of \$29.9 billion for Puerto Rico or \$300 billion over the past decade. This paper explores the implications of such disparities and advocates for policy reforms to address the inequities and promote access to quality healthcare for the people of Puerto Rico.

The healthcare systems in the United States and Puerto Rico operate within different ecosystems, facing unique challenges and opportunities. This section provides an overview of the healthcare costs in both regions and highlights the disparity in funding that Puerto Rico experiences.

The Healthcare Costs in the United States: The United States stands as one of the highest spenders on healthcare globally, with an expenditure of approximately \$4.3 trillion in 2020. This translates to an average spending of \$13,000 per person. Factors contributing to these high costs include the complexity of the healthcare system, administrative expenses, technological advancements, and the relatively higher costs of medical procedures and prescription drugs.

Disparities in Healthcare Funding for Puerto Rico: In stark contrast, Puerto Rico faces a significant disparity in healthcare funding compared to the United States. The U.S. Congress allocates only \$4,000 per capita for healthcare in Puerto Rico, representing a shortfall of \$9,000 per person or 69%

less than the funding provided to the mainland. This discrepancy is attributed to the discrimination from the U.S. Congress in allocating funding to the U.S. territories; in the case of Puerto Rico, the discrimination is \$29 billion in less healthcare funding to Puerto Rico. In the past decade alone, that amounts to just shy of \$ 300 billion. Even with such discrimination, the life expectancy rate of Puerto Ricans has risen to 80.69 years for 2023, up from 74.26 in 1995, a 7.96% increase and higher than that of the U.S., which stood at 76.40 years or 5.31% less than Puerto Rico. So Puerto Ricans live an average of 4.29 years more than the citizens of the 50 states. One of the reasons this has happened has been the implementation of the Puerto Rico Healthcare Plan, or Vital, as it is now known. Puerto Ricans without a health plan have decreased just shy of 8% or 248,000. Puerto Rico has, along with Hawaii, the second-highest percentage of insured Population, close to 92%. Moreover, Plan Vital has 1.5 million Puerto Ricans with access to healthcare, or 47% of the Puerto Rico population. In the U.S., access to the healthcare system is contingent on having health insurance, and 9.2% or 30 million Americans do not have any health insurance.

If you are wondering what the implications of such disparity? The most prescient is that 2% to 3% of Puerto Rico patients consume 80% of medical budgets.

During the pandemic, the Government of Puerto Rico conducted a campaign advising patients to stay away from Hospitals unless it was an emergency or a COVID-19 case. The campaign was so effective that Hospital demographics fell to as low as 30% occupancy rates, and even without the pandemic, the patients have continued to maintain the same behavior impacting the hospital's operations and occupancy levels, some three years into the pandemic.

Additionally, the inadequate allocation of healthcare funding in Puerto Rico has far-reaching consequences on the healthcare ecosystem and the well-being of its Population. Reduced funding limits the resources available for healthcare infrastructure, medical education, research and development, and the recruitment and retention of healthcare professionals. Consequently, Puerto Ricans face challenges such as limited access to specialized care, five to seven-hour wait times during medical appointments, new moms can't find OBGYN specialists, and, oftentimes, a six-month wait period for medical appointments, compromising the quality of care. These factors contribute to health disparities, worsen overall health outcomes, and impede progress toward health equity.

Also, the \$29 billion discrimination in healthcare funding intertwines with socioeconomic factors, exacerbating existing health disparities in Puerto Rico.

In addition, we face economic challenges, higher poverty rates, and limited resources compared to the mainland United States. Insufficient funding further compounds these challenges, impacting preventive care, disease management, and access to healthcare services. Consequently, Puerto Ricans are experiencing higher rates of chronic diseases such as diabetes or heart disease with poorer health outcomes, perpetuating a cycle of inequality.

While some efforts to address the disparities in healthcare funding for Puerto Rico have gained momentum in recent years, our current policymakers have focused most of their efforts on seeking Statehood for Puerto Rico; At the same time, this is a noble ideal; in my opinion, the healthcare of 3.11 million Puerto Rico, USA citizens is equally critical.

As the need to address the discrimination in healthcare costs between the United States and Puerto Rico and promote equitable access to quality care, we propose the following policy recommendations:

- **Sue the U.S. Congress** to increase healthcare funding allocation for Puerto Rico: The U.S. Congress should reevaluate the current funding allocation, considering the unique circumstances and healthcare needs of Puerto Rico. Equitable funding will help bridge the gap and ensure access to comprehensive healthcare services. No U.S. Citizen should be shortchanged by discrimination; receiving \$29 billion a year less is as close as a death sentence we have ever seen in our lifetimes.
- **Invest in developing and maintaining healthcare infrastructure** in Puerto Rico, including hospitals, clinics, and medical facilities, to enhance the delivery of healthcare services and improve access for the Population.
- **Puerto Rico must foster healthcare workforce development** by encouraging programs and incentives to attract and retain healthcare professionals in Puerto Rico, addressing the shortage of skilled personnel, and ensuring a robust healthcare workforce capable of meeting the Population's needs.
- **Puerto Rico must implement a Holistic Healthcare model** that prioritizes preventive care and disease management. By allocating resources towards preventive care initiatives, health education, and disease management programs to promote healthier lifestyles, reduce the burden of chronic diseases, and improve overall health outcomes.
- **Puerto Rico must spearhead investments in medical research, innovation, and technological advancements.** Doing so will foster a healthcare ecosystem that can contribute to scientific advances and improved healthcare practices.

The significant disparity in healthcare funding between the United States and Puerto Rico is a matter of concern, highlighting the need for equitable allocation of resources to ensure access to quality healthcare for all. Addressing these disparities requires a collaborative effort from policymakers, healthcare professionals, advocacy groups, and community leaders to advocate for policy reforms, secure fair funding, and promote equitable access to healthcare.

By bridging the gap in healthcare costs, Puerto Rico can move towards a fairer and more sustainable healthcare ecosystem, improving the overall well-being of its Population and fostering health equity.

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, and Puerto Ricans are caught in an inescapable discriminatory relationship with a U.S. Congress that allows the discriminatory allocation of healthcare funding to the 50 states. At the same time, 3.11 million U.S. Citizens of Puerto Rico face a death sentence for lack of adequate healthcare funding.

**As Martin Luther King used to say;
"Of all forms of inequality, injustice in healthcare is the most shocking and inhumane".**

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