



**Uncharted Migration: OAS Rapid Assessment Report of
Trafficking in Persons from the Dominican Republic into
Puerto Rico**

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This report is a rapid assessment on the likelihood of trafficking into Puerto Rico via its water border with the Dominican Republic.

Project Beneficiaries: Trafficking Victims from Latin America and the Caribbean.

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Executive Summary:

This OAS Rapid Assessment is a first examination of human trafficking in the context of migration bound for Puerto Rico. This report was researched in the summer of 2005. It is based on the field work of an OAS researcher, interviews with government officials and civil society representatives, a review of the existing literature and the very limited statistical information that together provide more insights on trafficking in persons in this region of the Caribbean. Very little official or unofficial information about trafficking in Persons in Puerto Rico has been researched or published. While there is still much to learn about the situation, this Rapid Assessment concludes that conditions obtain that indicate that there is likely human trafficking to some degree taking place in Puerto Rico. This finding was most recently borne out by the January 2006 raid in Puerto Rico, in the municipality of Dorado, in which U.S. Federal authorities entered the property of the shrimp company Eureka Marine Products with the suspicion that undocumented laborers were held there in inhuman conditions. This operation yielded the detention of thirty undocumented laborers.

Not surprisingly, Dominicans dominate the grouping of those foreign nationals in Puerto Rico who are vulnerable to human trafficking. This Rapid Assessment concludes that the economic factors¹ that compel many Dominicans to migrate clandestinely to Puerto Rico put them at risk of being exploited by traffickers. This fits an established pattern with regard to Dominican migrants, many of whom are known to be trafficking victims in other regions. Other nationalities who may be victims of trafficking in Puerto Rico are Haitians and Chinese. It is reasonable to conclude that for many migrants – and

¹ See Annex I

for traffickers – Puerto Rico is a convenient side-door entrance for gaining access to the North American mainland. Officials have found to date few Dominican victims of human trafficking in the continental United States, but this is part of the trend that the U.S. has found far fewer human trafficking victims than it estimates enter the country. It appears to underscore the need for greater vigilance in finding trafficking victims, particularly in the context of clandestine migration. Puerto Rico, as an Associated Free State (Estado Libre Asociado) that is a territory of the United States, is subject to U.S. Federal law and international instruments that bind the United States.

In Puerto Rico, most government officials are likewise only slowly recognizing the factors that may point to human trafficking. Government officials in Puerto Rico – particularly those working on migration matters – are understandably challenged by the fact that many of the illegal migrants they intercept are only in the movement phase of the trafficking process. Most appear to them as simply clandestinely smuggled migrants – and not future victims of debt labor or forced prostitution. In this regard there is a need for more awareness of the trafficking in persons phenomenon in general and the Eureka case is a positive step in that regard.

Officials in Puerto Rico keep few to no statistics on human trafficking. Some data are kept, generally in the context of interceptions and deportations, but they provide only limited insights on trafficking. Most notable, perhaps, is the number of foreign women detained in prostitution by Puerto Rican officials – in the year 2003, a total of 1,819 detentions were made; in 2004, the figure was 1,566. These data represent a considerable increase over previous years. While these data are not kept by nationality, the popular perception is that the vast majority of the persons detained are Dominicans

and out of legal status, making them particularly vulnerable to be controlled by traffickers. Additionally, there is a high volume of Dominican migration to Puerto Rico and it is plausible that Puerto Rico functions as a transit country for Dominican victims of trafficking.

The OAS recommends that local and Federal officials work with civil society to provide a wider understanding of human trafficking. A great need is to work more closely with the migrant communities in Puerto Rico to gain better insights on work patterns and how pay offs are made to those who organize clandestine migration. We also urge that further training and research be carried out in an effort to better quantify the dimensions of Dominicans and other nationals migrating to and through Puerto Rico.