

Service provision in the slums: the case of La Perla in San Juan, Puerto Rico

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As urbanization rates across the developing world increase, urban slums and informal settlements expand in order to absorb the influx of new residents; by 2030, the number of people residing in slums worldwide could double to 2 billion (UN-HABITAT, 2003). Slum dwellers live under squalid conditions: inadequate housing, little infrastructure, poor sanitation and a lack of access to basic public services such as water, sewage and garbage collection. Despite these circumstances, slums continue to grow, thrive and survive for generations. Though by no means a recent phenomenon, their increasing proliferation is causing changes in the fields of planning, development and governance in favor of slum upgrading and policies that benefit slum dwellers.

The purpose of this thesis is to study the basic services and infrastructure available to residents of the informal settlement of La Perla in San Juan, Puerto Rico. It explores the conditions in La Perla through studying the availability of services, the acquisition and quality of these services and who provides them.

It concurrently explores the governance structures that have emerged as a result of decades of marginalization and the absence of government involvement. As little research and academic information on La Perla exists, this study greatly expands the cache of knowledge on this settlement, hopefully informing public policy and addressing the needs of residents not only of La Perla, but residents in informal

settlements across Puerto Rico and the developing world.

This thesis addresses the specific questions of what basic services and infrastructure are available to the residents of La Perla; the quality of these services; what group or entity, be it public, private or a non-governmental organization provides these services; and what forms of informal governance have emerged. The answers to these questions seek to further comprehend La Perla's endurance as an informal settlement for over a century.

This research was divided into four tasks: review background documents, photograph the site, interview residents of La Perla and interview Puerto Rican government officials with knowledge of service provision in this community. The interviews were conducted in January 2015 and collected first-hand information on the levels of and access to service provision. Seven public services were selected for study: electricity, water, garbage collection, public transportation, education, fire and rescue, and safety and security. Through this methodology, I have compiled information on the public services available to the residents of La Perla, the quality of the services, how residents gain access to these, who provides them, and the role of tenure security, governance and government-led efforts in securing access.

The assumption that informal communities do not have access to many services is not the case in La Perla. The findings show La Perla challenges the perception of informal settlements as places that lack access to public services and infrastructure with a mix of formality and informality in its built form and availability of the services studied.

What I have found is an informal community that has access to the services explored in this thesis: electricity, water, garbage collection, public transportation, education, fire and rescue, and safety and security. They receive these services due to a combination of forces that includes tenure security, informal governance, political contact and government-led efforts. While the city government is in charge of the garbage collection, nongovernmental groups inside La Perla, along with residents, provide for safety and security. Informality exists within formal systems, as some residents connect illegally to the electrical grid and water system and many do not pay for this service. Residents still receive these services regardless of whether or not they pay for access.

The general sentiment that exists across San Juan is that La Perla is a dangerous slum filled with dilapidated houses, extreme poverty and criminals. However, beyond finding residents have access to basic services, I found La Perla to be a safe, vibrant community that residents care a lot for. Many walls and abandoned structures are covered with colorful artwork from both artists and residents that serve to not only beautify the community but fight against the image of decay.

Though access to services is not one of them, La Perla nevertheless faces many challenges. Access to the same services afforded to 'formal' communities and how they received them serves to explain why La Perla has endured for over 100 years, alongside residents' fervent defense of their community and feeling of belonging. La Perla still faces marginalization and lacks social and economic development and greater integration into Old San Juan's urban fabric.