

Why Puerto Rico Is Adding 'USA' to Its Driver's Licenses

Puerto Ricans have long been wrongly told that their driver's licenses are not proof that they are American but some question whether the change will resolve much.

By Eduardo Medina

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Humberto Marchand turned on his phone camera and began recording inside the airport in May because he could not believe what he was hearing.

The subsequent video was posted on social media and showed an employee of Hertz, the rental car chain, refusing to give Mr. Marchand his prepaid reserved car because he had presented a driver's license issued from Puerto Rico, where he is from. The employee did not realize that this meant he was American and ignored Mr. Marchand's pleas as he repeated, "It is a valid ID."

Eileen Vélez Vega, Puerto Rico's secretary of transportation and public works, felt increasingly frustrated as she watched that video in the spring, which reignited concerns over how Puerto Ricans are treated in the United States and the way their colonial past still vexes the island.

"I was shocked about how much lack of education, lack of knowledge was out there," Ms. Vélez Vega said in an interview, noting that people born in Puerto Rico, a commonwealth of the United States, have the same birthright American citizenship as people born in the 50 states. "I couldn't believe what was happening."

Ms. Vélez Vega and her department made calls to the United States Department of Homeland Security over the summer to discuss a possible solution.

On Tuesday, Puerto Rico's government revealed its plan: Driver's licenses will now read "Puerto Rico USA" on the top, an addition that officials hope will minimize issues when Puerto Ricans are traveling in the mainland United States.

There have been several high-profile cases this year of Puerto Ricans being wrongly told that their licenses are not really proof of American citizenship, with many of those instances gaining attention because of reporting from CBS: A Puerto Rican family flying home from Los Angeles was asked for passports because the airline employee appeared to be unaware that the island was U.S. territory.

In another case, a Puerto Rican man was not allowed to buy an engagement ring in California because a jewelry chain worker didn't accept his Puerto Rican driver's license as valid ID.

Roberto Cruz, the managing attorney of the southeast office of LatinoJustice, said that

“it is unfortunate that the Puerto Rican government has felt it is necessary to include the ‘USA’ stamp, but if it is helpful for Puerto Ricans to get decent treatment and the services they deserve, then we support it.”

Still, in an island that has had a complicated and at times charged relationship with the United States ever since it was annexed in 1898, after the defeat of Spain in the Spanish-American War, even the slightest change can trigger political questions that have been raised for more than a century: What, exactly, is Puerto Rico’s relationship to the United States, and what does sovereignty for the island mean in the future?

Many residents of Puerto Rico have long viewed the island’s status as a colonial territory as untenable, debating the pros and cons of statehood, being a commonwealth and independence, said Charles R. Venator-Santiago, a professor of Latino politics and law at the University of Connecticut.

Puerto Rico has held six nonbinding plebiscites on whether it should become a state, most recently in 2020, when 52 percent of voters on the island endorsed the move. Turnout has often been low, amid boycotts by critics who support the status quo, or the smaller faction that seeks independence.

Those dynamics have turned a seemingly mundane tweak on driver’s licenses into an emblem of the push for statehood, Professor Venator-Santiago said.

Beyond the political implications, some doubt that the USA label — which other territories like Guam also have on driver's licenses — will even prevent mishaps in the states.

One of those doubters, Mario Pabon, of Carolina, P.R., recalled that an older version of the Puerto Rican license that had an American flag printed on top did not help him avoid prejudice or embarrassing situations.

Around a decade ago, when he was in his forties, Mr. Pabon said he went with friends to a bar in San Diego, when an employee asked him for identification. Mr. Pabon pulled out his Puerto Rican license emblazoned with the American flag.

“You have to show us your passport,” Mr. Pabon recalled the worker telling him. His

passport was back home. The bar did not let him in that night, he said.

If Puerto Ricans could write across their licenses that they are valid proof that they're American, many "still won't get it," Mr. Pabon said.

Andrew J. Padilla, a doctoral fellow studying governance at New York University who is Puerto Rican, said that having "USA" on an ID "doesn't combat ignorance."

A 2017 poll showed that only a slim majority of Americans realize Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens.

Ms. Vélez Vega, of the Puerto Rican transportation department, said that there is a need to "educate further and to provide more orientation for folks outside of Puerto Rico" so they know the identifications are valid.

While the issue is not new, she said, the change this month was ultimately prompted because those problems were "getting more public and more frequent."

In 2019, José Guzmán Payano, 24, showed a Puerto Rican license to a CVS employee when trying to get over-the-counter cold medicine. But the employee asked about Mr. Payano's immigration status and then for a visa before denying him the medication.

Mr. Payano said in an interview that the new USA addition on licenses "is a really great idea because this clears a lot of doubt that people may have with the ID."

Similar confusion goes back decades.

Christina D. Ponsa-Kraus, a professor of legal history at Columbia Law School who has researched American territorial expansion, said that her mother was pulled over in Virginia in the 1960s and given a ticket for driving without a license even though she had a valid Puerto Rico driver's license.

"This sort of thing is just one among innumerable forms of discrimination, large and small, that Puerto Ricans have suffered because Puerto Rico is a colony," Professor Ponsa-Kraus said.

Some Puerto Rican advocacy organizations see some value in the new label, though they warned against believing it would totally solve the issue.

Surey Miranda, a co-founder of Diaspora For Puerto Rico, a nonprofit that aims to empower and support the Puerto Rican community, said that anything that can improve the way Puerto Ricans navigate services "is of course going to be welcome," but a deeper problem will still persist: the "second-class citizenship idea."

That idea relates to how Puerto Ricans who reside on the island cannot vote in general elections and how they aren't entitled to some federal benefits.

Vanessa Díaz, a professor of Latino studies at Loyola Marymount University who researches Puerto Rican culture and politics, said that discussions over the new driver's licenses underscore a "general ignorance around Puerto Rico and the reality of contemporary U.S. colonialism."

And the cases that have gained national attention highlight yet another issue that may not be solved by adding "USA" on identification, Professor Díaz said: Latinos of all kinds "are constantly treated as foreigners regardless of citizenship, whether you're an eighth-generation Mexican American, or a recent immigrant from anywhere in Latin America, or a Puerto Rican who lives in the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico."

For Mr. Marchand, who had the incident with Hertz earlier this year, the new licenses are a "step in a right direction," he said.

Mr. Marchand said he is proud that his story has led to some change, though he believes others will always find reasons to doubt a Puerto Rican's legitimate status as an American citizen.

"I knew I wasn't the only one," Mr. Marchand said of his experience. "This has got to end."