

# Study on Death Toll in Puerto Rico Following Hurricane Maria Last Year Is Raised from 64 to 2,975



A few weeks ago, Puerto Rico raised its death toll from Hurricane Maria from 64 to 2,975, following a report from George Washington University, which compared historical mortality rates to arrive at its figures. Much of the discrepancy comes from government failure to instruct physicians on how to certify deaths. Also, some of the deaths were not caused by the hurricane itself but from indirect causes, such as lack of medications. Critics say the death toll now is greatly inflated to qualify for more money from the US Congress for reconstruction and human services. The Puerto Rican government has submitted a request for \$139-billion for new projects. The likelihood of this being granted is in proportion to the number of deaths attributed to the tragedy. [See additional commentary in Forum section dated 2018 Aug 30.] -GEG

A study commissioned by Puerto Rico's governor Ricardo Rossello and released on Tuesday, raised the death toll as a result of Hurricane Maria last year from 64 to nearly 3,000.

The report, by researchers at George Washington University estimated there were 2,975 excess deaths in Puerto Rico stemming from the hurricane from September 2017 through February 2018. The total is vastly greater than the official fatality count of 64, and is more than double some of the

estimates from previous studies by academic researchers and media organizations, according to the WSJ.

For the past year, Puerto Rico's government faced criticism that it had drastically undercounted the number of fatalities caused by Maria.

Then, earlier this month, it acknowledged in a document filed to Congress that the death toll from Maria was much higher than the official total. But Gov. Rossello's administration said it would await the results of the George Washington University study, which it commissioned in December, to update the official count.

The release of the George Washington University study comes as the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Maria approaches on Sept. 20, and Congress considers the island government's request for federal aid to rebuild from the storm.

But where did the massive revision come from, and how were the nearly three thousand people missed the first time around? In one word, statistics.

*The George Washington University researchers estimated the number of excess deaths by analyzing death certificates and other mortality data, and comparing the number of deaths during the designated period to past mortality patterns. They calculated the total number of deaths in the period was 22% higher than the number of fatalities that would have been expected, the researchers said.*

Researchers also pointed to several problems in the death-certification process that contributed to the island government's undercounting of fatalities. Among them were a lack of training for physicians on how to certify deaths after a natural disaster and the government's lack of communication about proper death-certificate reporting prior to the 2017 hurricane season.

One can even all it “non-GAAP” deaths, or determinations revised well after the event, with the appropriate nudge here or there:

*Researchers’ interviews with people in Puerto Rico involved in the death-certification process revealed “confusion about the guidelines” and “reluctance to relate deaths to hurricanes due to concern about the subjectivity of this determination,” according to the study.*

The report even blamed the government’s poor communication skills and the lack of personnel training for being able to, wait for it, determine if a death was a death.

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Additional source on indirect deaths- [click here](#).