

Study says more than 4,600 Puerto Ricans died due to Hurricane Maria

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Miliana Montanez, 29, stands with a memorial book for her mother in Caguas, Puerto Rico. Montanez's mother, Ivette Leon, died weeks after Hurricane Maria hit the island, something her family says was the result of crippled infrastructure. Photo by: Erika P. Rodríguez for The Washington Post

Last September, Hurricane Maria devastated the island of Puerto Rico.

Government reports said that only 64 people died from the storm.

However, a new Harvard University study was released Tuesday, May 29. It says 4,645 people actually died because of the hurricane.

The study was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

In the eight months since the storm, Puerto Rico is still having problems getting power and phone service to residents. Hospitals do not have the space or equipment to treat everyone. Roads have been closed, and traffic is bad.

This has caused problems for everyone, especially those with long-term health problems or those living far out in the countryside. Many such people cannot get proper care and services.

Researchers Say Many Deaths Not Counted

For the new count, researchers surveyed about 3,000 households across the island. They compared the estimated death rate to Puerto Rico's death rate for the year before.

Their surveys showed that about 14 out of every 1,000 people in those households died from September 20 through December 31, 2017. That's more than 4,645 "excess deaths" after the storm that were not counted.

The new study criticized Puerto Rico's methods for counting the dead. It called for communities to develop better plans for natural disasters.

Among those who died as a result of medical service problems after the hurricane was Ivette Leon, age 54. She died on November 29.

Leon was feeling pain all over her body and chills, and went to a hospital. Doctors told her it was an infection. They gave her medication and released her to family the next day.

She did not get better, though. Miliana Montanez held her mother as she lay dying.

It took 20 minutes to find cell phone reception to make a 911 call. An ambulance got stuck in traffic because of poor roads and traffic lights not working and arrived too late.

"The worst part was knowing I could do nothing to help her," said Montanez.

The new study says there probably were thousands like Leon, who died because of the storm but were not counted.

Puerto Rico Has Not Issued Data Since November

The storm began September 20. At first, Puerto Rico's government reported that 16 people had died because of the hurricane. In early December, officials said 64 people had died.

Ricardo Rosselló is governor of Puerto Rico. His government did not immediately share death data. They also didn't share the method officials were using to count the dead. They were criticized for this.

Soon, news reporters estimated on their own that at least 1,000 people had died. After pressure from these groups and Congress, Rosselló asked for help to review the government's death certificate process.

When anyone dies, it is recorded on a death certificate. This gives an official reason for the person's death.

Lynn Goldman works in public health at George Washington University. She is working with Rosselló. Experts plan to research medical records and interview family members of those who have died to get a better official death count.

Journalists and other groups are trying to force the government to release official death data by going to court. The last information was released in November 2017. That was the last month official information was available.

Government spokesperson Eric Perlloni Alayon said the government does not plan to release any new data.

The Harvard researchers reported that every disaster-related death must be confirmed by a government group, the Forensic Sciences Institute. This group requires that dead bodies be brought to San Juan, the island's capital city, to be counted. Otherwise, an official must travel to the place where the death happened. This travel is difficult for many.

"There Are Many Stories Like Ours"

Many Puerto Ricans had long-term diseases worsened by the storm's effects. Such deaths can be difficult to track.

Leon's original death certificate said she died from "natural causes." This same official cause was given for many deaths after the storm.

Her family said Leon's name was misspelled on the death certificate. The government said she died from diabetes. However, Leon's family said she didn't have any long-term disease. Officials later corrected the documents. Still, it was one of several mistakes the family tracked.

Montanez stays awake many nights. She recalls how Leon gave each of her neighbors a whistle to call for help after the storm. She organized trick-or-treating by lantern light for the children in the neighborhood. She didn't want them to miss out on Halloween after the hurricane.

It should have been different, Montanez says.

"From day one, everything was failing," Montanez said. "There are many stories like ours."

Quiz

1 Read the introduction [paragraph 1-6].

Which sentence from the section shows one reason why people in Puerto Rico are still in danger?

- (A) Last September, Hurricane Maria devastated the island of Puerto Rico.
- (B) Government reports said that only 64 people died from the storm.
- (C) It says 4,645 people actually died because of the hurricane.
- (D) Hospitals do not have the space or equipment to treat everyone.

2 Read the section "Researchers Say Many Deaths Not Counted."

Select the paragraph from the section that shows how the researchers counted the deaths resulting from the storm.

- (A) For the new count, researchers surveyed about 3,000 households across the island. They compared the estimated death rate to Puerto Rico's death rate for the year before.
- (B) The new study criticized Puerto Rico's methods for counting the dead. It called for communities to develop better plans for natural disasters.
- (C) Among those who died as a result of medical service problems after the hurricane was Ivette Leon, age 54. She died on November 29.
- (D) The new study says there probably were thousands like Leon, who died because of the storm but were not counted.

3 Which sentence from the article BEST summarizes a MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) They gave her medication and released her to family the next day.
- (B) Otherwise, an official must travel to the place where the death happened.
- (C) Many Puerto Ricans had long-term diseases worsened by the storm's effects.
- (D) She recalls how Leon gave each of her neighbors a whistle to call for help after the storm.

4 One MAIN idea of the article is that many deaths are not being recorded correctly in Puerto Rico.

What is another MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) The storm has not caused problems for most of Puerto Rico.
- (B) The people of Puerto Rico are not interested in the death toll.
- (C) The government of Puerto Rico is trying to hide information.
- (D) The island of Puerto Rico has still not recovered from the storm.