

Estimated death toll in Puerto Rico from Hurricane Maria rises to 450

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The estimated death toll in Puerto Rico from Hurricane Maria, which slammed into the island on September 20, is far higher than previously stated, according to an investigation by Vox. As many as 450 people have died on the US territory, nearly ten times the official figure of 48.

“We knew from reports on the ground, and investigative journalists who’ve also been looking into this, that this [the official figure] was very likely way too low of a number,” Eliza Barclay, an editor at Vox, told *USA Today* in a report published yesterday.

On Thursday, only a few days after the initial Vox report on the death toll, US President Donald Trump met with Puerto Rican Governor Ricardo Rosello in Washington. He rated the response of the administration to the catastrophe a “10” out of 10. The comment demonstrated the contempt that the ruling elite has for the masses of workers on Puerto Rico, 80 percent of whom are still without power and will be for months.

Rosello joined in with the congratulations, though he did admit that “a lot still has to be done.”

Trump again made clear that federal assistance will be minimal. The administration is “helping a lot” and it is “costing a lot of money,” he claimed, but “at some point, FEMA has to leave, first responders have to leave and the people have to take over.”

Vox’s estimate of the death toll includes those recorded in the official figure; 36 deaths reported by local news outlets; an NPR report of an additional 49 bodies sent to hospital morgues; and another 50 casualties in one region, reported in the *Los Angeles Times*. It also took into account reports from the Puerto Rican Center for Investigative Reporting of 69 morgues at full capacity, and a report from San Juan’s *El Vocero* of another 350 bodies awaiting autopsies at the Institute

of Forensic Sciences.

On the one-month anniversary of Hurricane María, it is hard to imagine how things could be worse. The electrical blackout over most of the island is the longest in the history of the US. Forty percent of Puerto Ricans lack potable water, and thousands are forced to use water from wells contaminated with pollutants and sewage.

Earlier this week, the mayor of Canóvanas reported that several people in the city had died of Leptospirosis, a bacterial infection caused by polluted floodwaters. Dozens are dead from the disease throughout the country.

A few days before the scheduled reopening of Puerto Rican public schools, parents are being told to provide extra food and bottled water for their children. Children with conjunctivitis, a symptom of Leptospirosis, have been told to stay home.

Julia Keleher, Puerto Rico’s education secretary, is calling on authorities to install or repair water fountains for students. The *San Juan Star* reports that Keleher has denounced government agencies for not giving her reports on the conditions of the schools after the hurricane, and for the fact that virtually all 1,100 Puerto Rican public schools remain littered with debris left over by the hurricane—a major element in the Leptospirosis threat.

“When did the hurricane happen? How many days have passed? When are we resuming classes? At what schools is there still debris?” declared the secretary. Despite the increasing threat of Leptospirosis, schools will reopen Monday. The debris “does not make it impossible to resume classes, but it should not be happening,” said Keleher, “because the debris can bring other problems, such as Leptospirosis.”

Many teachers have had to carry out cleanup

operations at schools themselves, due to the lack of coordinated reconstruction.

On Tuesday Eli Díaz, the executive director of the Puerto Rican Water and Sewer Authority, declared that water service would continue to be intermittent until the electric grid, on which much of the water system depends, is fully restored.

Thirty-four percent of households still are still totally without water. Even those that have water report that it often appears grayish-brown coming out of their faucets. Diaz has said that this is due to the clogging of water intakes from debris left behind by the hurricane.

As of last Tuesday, less than eighteen percent of households had electric service. The Puerto Rico blackout has now lasted longer than any blackout on the US mainland.

The hurricane caused an estimated \$85 billion in damage in a country that is reeling from recession and faces the relentless demands of Wall Street creditors for more austerity and cuts in infrastructure and social programs to pay back their loans.



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