

Ten weeks since Hurricane María: Scientists say real death toll in Puerto Rico over 1,000

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Ten weeks after Hurricane María devastated Puerto Rico new estimates by social scientists put the death toll from the storm at nearly 1,100—20 times higher than the official figure of 55 reported by government authorities on the island and in Washington.

In a soon to be released report, Alexis Santos, a Puerto Rican demographer at Penn State University, and Jeffrey Howard, an independent health scientist and epidemiologist, compared the historical averages for September-October of the past seven years to the total number of September and October 2017 deaths recently reported by the Puerto Rico Department of Public Safety.

According to the news web site Vox, they found that in September 2017—the month María hit—there were 518 more deaths than the recent historical average for September and 567 more deaths in October 2017, for a total of 1,085 deaths likely linked to the hurricane. Given that the widespread power outages have continued into November, Vox noted, the number of indirect deaths from the hurricane is probably higher still.

By comparison, at least 1,800 people died in connection to Hurricane Katrina in 2005—the deadliest hurricane to hit US soil in the past 50 years.

The new figures confirm reports by other news agencies such as CNN, BuzzFeed and Vox that found hundreds of more fatalities based on interviews with funeral home directors, doctors, and local officials. It also exposes the cover-up by Puerto Rico Governor Ricardo Rosselló and the Trump administration of the real extent of the death and destruction, which has been exacerbated by the criminally indifferent response by government authorities.

“Either Donald Trump and his administration are unable to fulfill their responsibilities to American citizens or they simply do not care about Puerto Ricans who continue to suffer,” Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune said in a statement this week. Half of the population is still without power and at least 10 percent do not have

access to clean water.

“We are lucky to have had clean water for four weeks but there are many people who don’t,” Anthony, a recent University of Puerto Rico graduate told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The city of Caguas nearby has electricity, but here in the rural areas there is no power. We have to recharge our cell phones from our car batteries, wash our clothes with a washboard and eat food that is not perishable.”

The young man’s family is using an old generator for power, he said. “Neighbors are sharing generators with each other, just to keep their refrigerators going. The US military left here two weeks ago, and local authorities have handed out food only one or two times since the hurricane.

“Our house is made of concrete, but there are a lot of wooden homes in the mountains and rural areas that were completely destroyed. The center of the island is very poor and they received very little help, maybe a \$500 loan from FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Administration].”

“There is a mass emigration from the island to Florida, New York, California and other states,” Anthony said referring to the current exodus, including 183,000 Puerto Ricans who have reportedly resettled in Florida alone. “It seems everyone who can is leaving.”

With the full backing of the Trump administration and his education secretary Betsy DeVos, authorities on the island are using the disaster to press ahead with their plans to close hundreds of schools, lay off thousands of public school teachers and expand for-profit charter schools.

“The government had plans to close hundreds of schools before the hurricane,” Anthony said. “Teachers and parents believe that the government is using the hurricane as an excuse not to reopen schools. Some teachers have been arrested for protests.

“My sister’s high school recently reopened, but only after pressure came from teachers, parents and students. It is only open from 7:30 to 10:30 a.m., not a full day, and it does not have electricity. My cousin’s elementary school is only open two or three hours a day. The authorities wouldn’t reopen it, even though teachers, workers and volunteers had cleared out debris and cleaned it up. It’s a small community school that has been at the center of the community for years, and the authorities didn’t want to reopen it even though it was ready to go. They finally opened it after protests.

“The death toll is far higher than they want to admit. Suddenly there are very few updates on the number of refugees who are homeless. The storm was very strong and people lost everything, and they’re forced to live with relatives or with only a tarp for a roof. One man like Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos is worth \$100 billion, but the US government says there’s no money to help Puerto Rico. Some of Bezos’ fortune would go a long way to help,” Anthony concluded.

Puerto Rico is already impoverished by three decades of deindustrialization and a decade of economic contraction and financial looting by Wall Street. The storm has raised the official poverty rate to 52 percent, up from 44.3 percent before the hurricane struck, according to a study by the Center of Census Information of the University of Puerto Rico (CIC).

In real terms the impact is even greater. Household incomes in many cases have sunk, due to workers laboring fewer hours per week or no hours at all due to the lack of electricity in businesses and residential areas. At the same time, prices and expenses have risen.

CIC economist José Caraballo told the *Prensa Latina* news service that the growth of poverty is expected to continue as more workers lose their jobs, especially those with incomes 25 to 50 percent above the poverty line. This could soon drive the poverty rate to 59.8 percent of the population. Some towns in central highlands Puerto Rico are suffering from childhood poverty rates that approach 80 percent.

Far from implementing measures to relieve poverty, abolish inequality and restore services, the Rosselló administration and the Democrats and Republicans in Washington are promoting free market policies that will further delay the restoration of basic services and impoverish the population while creating profit opportunities for vulture capitalists.

On November 2-3, politicians, business leaders and NGOs held a conference at a posh San Juan hotel titled

“Rebuild Puerto Rico: The Economic Summit.” The purpose of the meeting, organized by the Minority Chamber of Commerce (MCC), was to set up so-called public-private partnerships to rebuild the island.

According to *Centro de Periodismo Informativo* press agency, the tone of the meeting was set by the MCC’s public relations chief Bill Kress, who boasted of the profit opportunities the devastating hurricane opened for investors. “When one door closes, another opens,” declared Kress. “It would be more appropriate to say that in Puerto Rico’s case, the doors and the roofs have been torn off,” he added cynically. “This is the moment to invest, to take advantage of all this,” Kress salivated.

Manuel Laboy, Rosselló’s Secretary for Economic Development, spoke of “interesting opportunities” for investors on the basis of free-market reforms he proposed be sold with the advertising phrase “Paradise Performs.” “Puerto Rico is a tropical paradise and one can accomplish great investments in Puerto Rico,” Laboy declared. “Paradise Performs is a slogan that we are going to promote with all our resources.”

According to Laboy, the month of December marks the end of the process of relief and the beginning of reconnecting and rebuilding, while 2018 will be the *Relaunch* phase, the rebranding of Puerto Rico, as a product that returns to the world market.

Many of the speakers at the summit called for deregulation and the granting of “fast track” construction permits, with little or no government oversight. A key “reform” of the Rosselló administration is anti-labor legislation that will further degrade job and pension rights.

Not to be left out, FEMA representative Doug Moraga declared, “Right now, Puerto Rico is the ‘Big Fish,’ we need to take advantage of that opportunity.”



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