

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Hurricane Maria Responsible For Over 4,000 Deaths In Puerto Rico, New Research Shows

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Staff **May 29, 2018**



Although the government of Puerto Rico's official Hurricane Maria death toll remains at 64, new data from researchers from Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and other institutions, has cast further doubt on the government's official tally, estimating that roughly 4,645 people died as a result of the storm's passage -- many of them from delayed medical care.

The researchers' estimate was published today in the [New England Journal of Medicine](#), and they have said that their results remain imprecise, with more definitive studies still being prepared.

According to the Government of the Virgin Islands, [five people died as a direct result of Hurricanes Irma and Maria](#), which ravaged the territory in September of last year. But the USVI government's death toll does not factor in residents who died after being airlifted out of the territory for medical care. As of April, [48 medical evacuees](#), many of them dialysis patients, had died following their displacement.

According to the published results, researchers surveyed 3,299 residences across Puerto Rico and interviewed their occupants. These occupants reported that 38 people living in their households had died between Sept. 20, when Hurricane Maria struck, and the end of 2017. That toll, converted into a mortality rate, was extrapolated to the larger population and compared with official statistics from the same period in 2016, according to the results.

"Our results indicate that the official death count of 64 is a substantial underestimate of the true burden of mortality after Hurricane Maria," the researchers wrote. "Our estimate of 4645 excess deaths from September 20 through December 31, 2017, is likely to be conservative since subsequent adjustments for survivor bias and household-size distributions increase this estimate to more than 5000. These adjustments represent one simple way to account for biases, but we have made our data publicly available for additional analyses.

"Our estimates are roughly consistent with press reports that evaluated deaths in the first month after the hurricane. Our estimates also indicate that mortality rates stayed high throughout the rest of the year. These numbers will serve as an important independent comparison to official statistics from death-registry data, which are currently being reevaluated,^{13,34} and underscore the inattention of the U.S. government to the frail infrastructure of Puerto Rico."

Hurricane Maria dealt its hardest blow to Puerto Rico, causing floods and mudslides along with ferocious winds that downed trees and washed away homes, leaving the island in ruin for months.