

# Puerto Rico governor raises Hurricane Maria death toll from 64 to 2,975



In this Oct. 5, 2017 file photo, a Puerto Rican national flag is mounted on debris of a damaged home in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in the seaside slum La Perla, San Juan, Puerto Rico. (AP Photo/Ramon Espinosa)

Puerto Rico's governor on Tuesday raised the official death toll from Hurricane Maria from 64 to 2,975, in response to a new study that found the initial numbers reported were undercounted.

The study, an independent investigation ordered by the local government, found that nearly 3,000 people died in the hurricane, which hit the island in September 2017.

Gov. Ricardo Rossello responded to the study by the Milken Institute School of Public Health at George Washington University by officially raising the toll.

The number is more than double the government's previous estimated death toll of 1,400.

"We never anticipated a scenario of zero communication, zero energy, zero highway access," Rossello said. "I think the lesson is to anticipate the worst."

A previous study led by a team of Harvard scientists found that more than 4,600 people were killed in the devastation, dismissing the initial toll of 64 as a "substantial underestimate."

## **BBC REPORTER COVERING HAWAII HURRICANE HIT BY FALLING TREE DURING LIVE REPORT: 'THAT WAS UNEXPECTED'**

Rossello said he's forming a commission to study the response to the storm. He said a registry of vulnerable people will also be created prior to any future hurricanes.

There's no national standard for how to calculate disaster-related deaths. While the National Hurricane Center (NHC) reports only direct deaths, such as those caused by flying debris or drowning, some local governments may include indirect deaths from things as heart attacks and house fires.



This photo, from NOAA, shows Hurricane Maria at its strongest on Sept. 20, 2017. (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration)

Researchers with George Washington said they counted deaths over the span of six months — a much longer period than usual — because so many people were without power during that time.

The number of dead has political implications for the Trump administration, which was accused of responding half-heartedly to the disaster. Shortly after the storm, when the official death toll stood at 16, President Trump marveled over the small loss of life compared to that of “a real catastrophe like Katrina.”

## **HURRICANE LANE CREATED A STEAMY WHITE-OUT AT HAWAII'S KILAUEU VOLCANO**

Hurricane Katrina, which struck New Orleans in 2005, was directly responsible for about 1,200 deaths, according to the NHC. That does not include indirect deaths of the sort the George Washington researchers counted in Puerto Rico.

In response to the death toll rise, the White House said Tuesday that “the federal government has been, and will continue to be, supportive of Governor Rosselló's efforts to ensure a full accountability and transparency of fatalities resulting from last year's hurricanes – the American people, including those grieving the loss of a loved one, deserve no less.”

The administration said they're “focused on Puerto Rico's recovery and preparedness for the current Hurricane season.”

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.*

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