

## **Hurricane Maria's Impact on Puerto Rico: How a Corrupt Government and Debt-Ridden Island Created the Perfect Storm for Disaster**

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The scenic island of Puerto Rico is beautiful from coast to coast. However, when one takes a deeper dive into her political climate, government, and the state of her people, it won't take very long to realize the potentially irreparable harm being done. From seemingly unpayable debt, to a vicious cycle of corruption, and being hit by the most deadly hurricane since 2004, Puerto Rico's socioeconomic standing in the world is quickly plummeting. In order to understand the current state of this nation and why they are suffering so violently, it's important to understand that these issues are nothing new, rather they've simply been magnified.

Since its American colonization in 1898, Puerto Rico and her people have faced many trials and tribulations, but three consistent problems have plagued this commonwealth since its infancy: systemic corruption, fluctuating poverty, and a lack of representation in the United States. The island's first governor, Charles Allen, was appointed by President McKinley as a reward for political favors, campaign contributions, and to establish the American Sugar Refining Company. This transfer from a coffee-industry to a sugar-based economy resulted in mass-poverty which ravaged the entire island. Additionally, Puerto Ricans were recognized as citizens 19 years after American colonization, only so they could be deployed as troops in WW1. This resulted in 3,540 deaths from the commonwealth. Although this seems far beyond the reach of what affects Puerto Rico today, history is repeating itself, and these three issues have become motifs in Puerto Rican culture.

In order to fully comprehend why Hurricane Maria was so destructive, it's key to note that prior to this natural disaster, Puerto Ricans had been suffering immensely. This category five hurricane which occurred in September of 2017 was the tipping point for Puerto Rico's socioeconomic state. Primarily, Hurricane Maria cost Puerto Rico between \$95 billion- \$139 billion in damages. This range is so broad due to inaccurate estimates and an inadequate allocation of funds stemming from government corruption, unclear negotiations, and an increase in new damage findings. This \$139 billion dollars was fifteen times more the annual budget for the entire island. However, regardless of governmental fraud and dishonesty, when taken into

perspective this amount was exactly what the island needed to get back to their pre-disaster state; that is \$71 billion in debt with half of its residents living below the poverty line. Hurricane Maria completely flattened the island's energy grid, it obliterated infrastructure, left more than 160,000 homes damaged or destroyed, destroyed the island's main water systems, and left many schools ruined. Although they had received congressional allocations, grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development and private insurance companies. However, even with these funds, an additional \$70 billion was still needed. Soon after disaster had struck, a federal judge ruled that the Puerto Rican government themselves had no say over their finances, rather an oversight board created by the U.S. Congress would make final decisions for the island's recuperation. In order to even enter the beginning stages of recovery, the island was going to need considerable funding from the United States, to which President Trump stated he would be allocating \$91 billion to Puerto Rico. Although this gave the Puerto Rican government and people hope for recovery, this dream was quick fleeting as the three year anniversary is quickly approaching and Congress has only approved \$44 billion out of the initial promised amount. This already economically depleting island was in the face of catastrophe when Hurricane Maria struck, but her finances were just scratching the surface of this natural disaster's true effects.

Hurricane Maria was broadcasted to the world as an economic crisis, and rightfully so, but in its true essence this disaster was a humanitarian crisis above all else. The storm claimed 4,645 lives. More than 250,000 residents were left without a clean water source or access to proper food. Areas that have had their clean water restored are still not clean enough to drink straight. Even where water service has been restored, many communities still have a "boil water" advisory in place. Other areas are still purchasing bottled water to get the clean water they need. Additionally, having enough clean food for displaced citizens in need was extremely difficult for nearly a year and a half. It was a hassle to access groceries and fresh food. Many relied on meals provided by FEMA, the Red Cross, World Central Kitchen, and other entities. More than 1.4 million residents were powerless, and after 328 days electricity and cellular telephone reception was fully restored. 300,000 homes were damaged and an additional 70,000 were destroyed. All the while, FEMA has also admitted that "62 percent of Puerto Ricans' requests to repair their homes were rejected or are in process." It is appalling that time and time again, Puerto Rico and her people are forgotten and left to fend and fight for themselves.

Outside of the obvious human rights violations which occurred at the hands of the Puerto Rican and U.S. government, there was an issue which plagued the island after Maria hit and it wasn't discussed enough. The mental health of the citizens in Puerto Rico. Over 5,000 people with suicidal ideation called Línea PAS, a government helpline, from September to January. This

was nearly triple the number of Puerto Ricans who had called in the previous year. In the five months which remained in 2017 post hurricane, 253 Puerto Ricans committed suicide and thousands have reported instances of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This mental health crisis which occurred in Puerto Rico held a direct link to the human rights violations, and both should be considered a joint humanitarian crisis. Now, although Puerto Rico has made a remarkable recovery since the hurricane struck only three years ago, there were many challenges which added weight to this Hurricane's magnitude. Potentially without them, the number of deaths, those left homeless and resourceless, and the general suffering which occurred could have been minimized.

Due to a lack of adequate distribution of resources and funds by FEMA, HUD, Congress, and most significantly a corrupt governing body, Puerto Rico and her people were left to fend for themselves. Mountinous debt, a plea for honest government officials, and a still-recovering island post disaster may sound like irreparable harm. But, although systemic corruption, fluctuating poverty, and a lack of representation in the United States has affected Puerto Rico since it's American colonization, resilience, strength, and perseverance amongst her people have had the greatest impact of all.

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