



Puerto Rico: One Year After Hurricane Maria

Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico last September, leaving behind widespread destruction and a humanitarian crisis. The island had already been impacted by Hurricane Irma two weeks earlier. In addition to the devastating human toll, the storms exacerbated the serious financial challenges already facing the island and its residents. While Congress has provided over \$35 billion in funding to help restore the island back to some sense of normalcy, the Puerto Rican government estimates another \$118 billion is needed to fully rebuild.¹ Below are some action items Congress should consider to help Puerto Rico recover, rebuild, and chart a new course:

- **Repair and rebuild homes.** Over 150,000 homes were destroyed or damaged, leaving many families without shelter or a place to return.²
- **Make schools safer.** Eighty-five percent of schools reported storm damage, with 38 to 44 schools permanently closing because of structural damage caused by Maria.³
- **Strengthen critical infrastructure.** The hurricanes damaged over 25 percent of the island's transmission line towers and poles, cutting power to every customer connected to the grid. It has taken nearly a year after the storm to fully restore power to every resident on the island.⁴
- **Promote resilient building.** Underinvestment and deferred maintenance, exacerbated by a crushing \$123 billion debt obligation, has slowed rebuilding efforts compared to nearby islands.⁵ The U.S. Virgin Islands, for example, was quicker to restore power, in part due to prior investments in infrastructure and mitigation efforts implemented by the government.⁶
- **Update existing emergency preparedness plans.** Only 37 percent of municipalities surveyed stated disaster preparedness plans worked adequately after the storm.⁷
- **Grow and preserve communities.** The hurricanes forced over 135,000 Puerto Ricans to leave for the U.S. mainland, especially young adults.⁸ Already the island has one of the oldest populations in the region and lowest birth rates in the world.⁹
- **Support local families.** Permanent out-migration, and resulting low enrollment, caused nearly 300 out of the over 1,100 schools on the island to close indefinitely.¹⁰ The closures leave approximately 60,000 students without a permanent fix.¹¹
- **Encourage sustainable economic growth.** Puerto Rico's economic activity dropped by 12 percent following the storms, causing a significant blow to the fragile economy.¹²

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- ¹ <http://www.chicagotribune.com/g00/news/nationworld/politics/ct-trump-signs-disaster-aid-bill-20171026-story.html?i10c.encReferrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8%3D&i10c.ua=1&i10c.dv=14>; and <http://www.p3.pr.gov/assets/pr-draft-recovery-plan-for-comment-july-9-2018.pdf>
- ² <http://www.p3.pr.gov/assets/pr-draft-recovery-plan-for-comment-july-9-2018.pdf>
- ³ <http://www.p3.pr.gov/assets/pr-draft-recovery-plan-for-comment-july-9-2018.pdf>
- ⁴ <http://www.p3.pr.gov/assets/pr-draft-recovery-plan-for-comment-july-9-2018.pdf>; and <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-08-24/two-very-last-puerto-ricans-got-power-today-now-work-build-stronger-grid-must>
- ⁵ <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/694231.pdf>; and <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/03/business/dealbook/puerto-rico-debt.html>
- ⁶ <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/694231.pdf>
- ⁷ <http://www.p3.pr.gov/assets/pr-draft-recovery-plan-for-comment-july-9-2018.pdf>
- ⁸ https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/PDF/puerto_rico_post_maria-2018-final.pdf; https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/RB2017-01-POST-MARIA%20EXODUS_V3.pdf
- ⁹ <http://www.p3.pr.gov/assets/pr-draft-recovery-plan-for-comment-july-9-2018.pdf>
- ¹⁰ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2018/04/06/puerto-rico-to-close-nearly-one-third-of-its-public-schools-as-it-pushes-charters-and-vouchers/?utm_term=.040af53e6631; and <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/6/15/17455746/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-schools-closing>
- ¹¹ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/6/15/17455746/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-schools-closing>
- ¹² <http://www.p3.pr.gov/assets/pr-draft-recovery-plan-for-comment-july-9-2018.pdf>