



AMERICAN STATISTICAL ASSOCIATION

Promoting the Practice and Profession of Statistics®

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January 9, 2018

The Honorable Ricardo Rosselló
Governor
La Fortaleza
P.O. Box 9020082
San Juan, PR 00902-0082

Dear Governor Rosselló,

I write as president of the American Statistical Association. First, let me express my sincere empathy for the many challenges Puerto Rico faces both due to the 2017 hurricanes and to the longer term economic and financial difficulties. The American Statistical Association (ASA), with its 19,000 members, would be happy to be of any help.

Secondly, please allow me to address recent reports of Puerto Rican (PR) government officials dismissing the conclusions of several independent studies regarding deaths due to Hurricane Maria, including a thorough analysis published by the New York Times. These reports have employed well-established statistical tools for estimating the number of deaths attributable to Hurricane Maria and have fairly characterized the uncertainty about that number. These kinds of approaches are commonly relied upon and trusted in situations where direct confirmation of the cause of death is not easily done.

I also understand the Puerto Rico Institute of Statistics (PRIS) is underfunded and faces challenges to its independence. Combining both points, I am disappointed that, to the best of my knowledge, executive order 2018-001—establishing the panel to revise the number of deaths due to Hurricane Maria¹—does not require independent experts in statistical analysis be involved. The Puerto Rico Institute of Statistics, for example, has vast knowledge on how the Puerto Rico mortality statistics program works after it performed a review in 2010 that lead to improvements in the way the cause of deaths are classified and in ensuring all deaths are counted.

¹

https://estado.pr.gov/apex/apex_util.get_blob?s=6760935070132&a=118&c=8703109913745663&p=14&k1=3382&k2=&ck=3E6FF3F8086F8BE58B0DC7AE009621CF&rt=IR

Government statistics play a powerful role in any democracy. They empower the economy, serve the health and welfare of its citizens, improve governance, and inform decisions and policies in the public and private sector, among many other vital functions. Government statistics are also fundamental to evidence-based policymaking, the engagement of which is on a rapid rise in local, state, and federal governments. Government statistics are produced through rigorous scientific processes and analyses performed by experts that can function independently. Dismissing the conclusions of reports based on sound statistical analysis is akin to discrediting evidence-based policymaking and more broadly, scientific analysis.

Because of their broad and profound importance, it is imperative the government statistics be independent, objective, accurate, and timely and be perceived as such. Just as importantly it is important to have adequate statistics on a variety of topics. I echo the 2016 recommendations² of the Congressional Task Force on Economic Growth in Puerto Rico “that the government of Puerto Rico consider appropriating a level of funding to the Puerto Rico Institute of Statistics that is commensurate with its important responsibilities.... [and] that the Institute of Statistics continue to protect its independence.” We understand the difficult fiscal environment Puerto Rico faces that make funding for PRIS hard. Nonetheless, we believe that in such times government statistics are all the more important to inform the policies to help Puerto Rico and its leaders navigate through the difficulties.

These are very challenging times for Puerto Rico. Let me reiterate my offer for the ASA to be of any help, for example, on a conference to explore how your government could best take advantage of evidence-based policymaking. The staff contact would be ASA Director of Science Policy Steve Pierson: spierson@amstat.org; 703.302.1841. I also encourage you to engage the ASA Puerto Rico chapter, led by Professor Roberto Rivera of the University of Puerto Rico.

Finally, allow me to repeat my firm belief that accurate, objective, and timely statistics will help you and all PR residents.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Lisa LaVange
2018 President
American Statistical Association

²

<https://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Bipartisan%20Congressional%20Task%20Force%20on%20Economic%20Growth%20in%20Puerto%20Rico%20Releases%20Final%20Report.pdf>