

47 Scientific Organizations Urge Puerto Rico's Governor Not to Dismantle Statistical Agency

AAAS CEO transmits letter

ALEXANDRIA, Va. (May 7, 2018) – Today, 47 US and international scientific organizations and professional societies sent a [letter](#) to Puerto Rico Gov. Ricardo Rosselló urging him to keep the Puerto Rico Institute of Statistics (PRIS) autonomous and independent. The letter is the latest show of support for the Caribbean island's only independent and dedicated source of statistics.

Earlier this year, Puerto Rico's legislature was considering a proposal that would dismantle PRIS by reorganizing the agency's statistical functions and placing them under the Department of Economic Development and Commerce (DEDC). The plan also requires the DEDC secretary to outsource all statistical functions currently performed by PRIS. Rosselló is expected to present the latest reorganization plan in the coming days, which the legislature must approve by June 30.

Currently, PRIS is an independent government agency of the executive branch with many protections established by law—including having an executive director named to 10-year terms and a board of directors composed by experts—to ensure its impartial collection, production and communication of statistical data. Such protections would be eliminated under the government of Puerto Rico's current reorganization plan.

The [letter](#) sent today—led by the American Statistical Association and transmitted by American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Chief Executive Officer Rush Holt—emphasizes the importance of PRIS continuing to operate independently of political influences, bureaucracy, and conflicts of interest. In justifying this call, the letter states:

At this critical historical juncture, Puerto Rico needs accurate, objective and timely statistics. Government statistics empower the economy, serve the health and welfare of citizens, improve governance and inform decisions and policies in the public and private sectors, 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. To address the challenges posed by its decade-long economic recession and the devastation of back-to-back hurricanes, Puerto Rico must chart its path toward sustainable recovery using reputable and reliable data and statistical methods.

Experts believe inaccurate and dated statistical systems underlie many of the problems Puerto Rico is now facing. For example, before Hurricanes Irma and Maria, which devastated the island in September 2017, Puerto Rico lacked the appropriate statistical methods to accurately measure deaths caused by natural disasters. Despite multiple reports that indicate more than 1,000 people died because of Hurricane Maria, the official government death toll remains at 64. Recently, PRIS approved a series of methods to measure the death toll from future natural disasters in Puerto Rico, as well as to produce the final estimates of the Hurricane Maria death toll in Puerto Rico.

Although PRIS has been underfunded for years and must constantly deal with resistance from other local agencies to collaborate, its [accomplishments](#) have helped the commonwealth in many ways. For example, its work helped identify Medicaid fraud, saving taxpayers \$10 million annually, and revealed a statistical bias in the formulas used to compensate doctors in Puerto Rico under Medicare that cost the local economy about \$120 million annually. The agency also played a crucial role in correcting the Consumer Price Index, which the government had been overestimating between 2001 and 2006, causing Puerto Ricans to unnecessarily pay more for everyday items such as gasoline.

Since the plans to dismantle PRIS were announced, the organization has not only received strong and swift support from the scientific community, but from individuals and political leaders in Puerto Rico and the US. A [petition](#), in part organized by the ASA, asking Puerto Rico's political leaders to reconsider its reorganization plans has been signed by more than 3,000 individuals, including former National Institutes of Health Director and Nobel Laureate Harold Varmus and president of the National Academy of Sciences Bruce Alberts. Signifying the importance of the issue, the number of US and international organizations that have signed today's letter rivals the 46 that signed onto this year's [statement of support for former Greek chief statistician Andreas Georgiou](#), who is unjustly facing civil and criminal charges for his leadership to produce the economic statistical data between 2010 and 2015.

There have also been multiple op-eds and articles published by outlets including [BBC](#), [NBC News](#), [Sense about Science USA](#), [Scientific American](#), [The Hill](#), [Science](#) and [Nature](#). ASA President Lisa LaVange sent letters to [Rosselló](#), the [PR Senate president](#) and the [PR House speaker](#), protesting the plan.

At a moment when Puerto Rico residents are demanding transparency on critical issues such as the restoration of electrical power and proposed education reforms, the island is also debating the best path forward for recovery and trying to project the effects of austerity measures on

the Puerto Rican economy. Eliminating PRIS now would be counterproductive. An Institute of Statistics that is autonomous, independent, free of conflict of interests and receiving appropriate levels of funding is key for reliable and publicly accessible statistics, which in turn are of utmost importance to the evidence-based public policies that can lift Puerto Rico out of its crisis.

See also the following ASA press releases:

- March 22, 2018: [Efforts to Dismantle Puerto Rico Statistics Agency Being Fought on Two Intensifying Fronts](#)
- February 5, 2018 [Calls to Keep Puerto Rico's Institute of Statistics Independent Grow Louder](#)

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About the American Statistical Association

The ASA is the world's largest community of statisticians and the oldest continuously operating professional science society in the United States. Its members serve in industry, government and academia in more than 90 countries, advancing research and promoting sound statistical practice to inform public policy and improve human welfare. For additional information, please visit the ASA website at www.amstat.org.

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