Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico on 20 September 2017 as a Category 4 hurricane. Sustained windspeeds exceeded 100 mph (160 km h⁻¹) and over 900 mm of rainfall was recorded. Maria was estimated to have caused US$90 billion in economic losses, making it the third costliest Atlantic hurricane ever, after Katrina in 2005 and Harvey in 2017. What makes Maria unique is the controversy over the hurricane’s death toll.

**A catastrophic event**

Maria caused widespread devastation across the eastern Caribbean in Dominica, the Dominican Republic, Guadeloupe, the US Virgin Islands (see photo), Martinique and Puerto Rico. It was the tenth most intense Atlantic hurricane on record measured by low air pressure.

Puerto Rico — an incorporated territory of the USA with 4 million inhabitants — was ill-prepared for Maria. A long-running debt crisis has limited the territory’s ability to invest in infrastructure, leading to a sub-standard water-supply system and electricity grid. Both of these were severely damaged by Hurricane Irma which struck the island 2 weeks before Maria. Hurricane Maria destroyed the island’s electricity grid: even a year later it is still not fully repaired.

What was the real death toll of this major hurricane? **Cameron Dunn** investigates
Maria’s death toll

Maria’s death toll has been a subject of great controversy. The Puerto Rican government declared an official figure of 64 in December 2017. This figure was soon questioned by journalists and universities (see graph) based on their own investigations, but it remained the official Puerto Rican (and therefore US) government death toll until August 2018 — almost a year later.

Journalists and researchers visited morgues and funeral homes, interviewed survivors and compared the post-Maria death rate to that of a ‘normal’ year. Eventually, in August 2018, the Puerto Rican government accepted George Washington University’s estimate of 2,975 deaths: more than 45 times the figure of 64 it had stuck to for months.

It makes Maria the third most deadly hurricane to hit US territory, and the worst for 117 years.

On 29 September 2017 President Trump stated: ‘The loss of life — it’s always tragic — but it’s been incredible the results that we’ve had with respect to loss of life. People can’t believe how successful that has been, relatively speaking.’ In the light of the revised death toll, these words now make little sense.

Questions

1. Who might have an interest in low estimated death tolls from natural disasters, and why?
2. How far do you think the low official death toll affected the way US citizens perceived the response to Maria? Now the death toll has been revised how likely is that view to change?
3. The official US government response to Maria has been heavily criticised. Would it have been better if Puerto Rico was a US state, rather than an incorporated territory?

Numbers are important

Clearly the number of deaths is important in human terms. Many families lost loved ones and had their lives changed forever and this must be recognised. It is important in other ways too:

- A death toll of 64 could be viewed as a ‘success’ in terms of disaster management, given the magnitude of Hurricane Maria and the relative poverty of Puerto Rico. Incomes on the island are about 50% of those in the USA.
- A figure of 2,975 dead is a very different matter. This exceeds the death toll of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Further research

The George Washington University study can be found here: https://tinyurl.com/yd83unyt
The Harvard Study is here: https://tinyurl.com/y8trr538
The two studies have different methodologies, and different death-toll ranges, and it is interesting to compare their results.
You can explore the government response to Maria using the FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) here: www.fema.gov/hurricane-maria

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