

## ASA Responds to Ongoing Crisis in Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands

*October 17, 2017*

The American Sociological Association expresses deep concern with the unfolding humanitarian crisis in the American territories of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands in the wake of Hurricane Maria.

Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands have experienced unprecedented devastation with grave human consequences. A month after the hurricane, millions remain without access to reliable and steady sources of electricity, food, and clean water. Medical supplies and diesel for power plants and transportation are running low and are not reaching those in most need, particularly in the municipalities in the interior of the island as well as in remote rural areas. Communication remains severely compromised throughout Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Thousands have lost their homes and most of their cherished belongings. Public health officials have expressed concern about widespread water contamination and the potential spread of waterborne, foodborne, and mosquito related diseases. These precarious conditions have exacerbated an already dire fiscal, social, and political situation in these U.S. territories.

For decades, sociologists have carefully studied the human impacts of disaster. This research has consistently shown that the majority of those who reside in the most vulnerable places are also the most vulnerable people. Race, social class, gender, and age influence where people live, where they work, and where they go to school. This, in turn, literally becomes a matter of life and death in disaster, influencing who is killed, injured, and most likely to be displaced. Hurricane Katrina, perhaps the most studied modern U.S. disaster, revealed such structured inequality, where African Americans suffered disproportionate loss of life, were displaced further from their homes, and were the least likely to have the opportunity to return.

This structured inequality may be exacerbated in the current context given that Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are not states, but rather U.S. territories. Given this, we are deeply troubled with the federal government's slow and, thus far, insufficient response. Hurricane relief for Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands has paled in comparison to the relief efforts in Texas and Florida after Hurricanes Harvey and Irma. As sociologists, it is incumbent upon us to share our knowledge about social inequality, especially in the context of disaster relief, so the federal government and the American public can be cognizant of the importance of ensuring equal treatment to all American citizens, regardless of whether they reside in states or in territories, are rich or poor, or are white or non-white.

We call on the federal government to expedite all emergency efforts, to collaborate with local civil society organizations and international bodies, and to accelerate recovery and support initiatives so that they reach residents throughout all parts of the islands, and to invest the needed resources to reconstruct and rebuild Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

After the initial emergency response period ends, we encourage sociologists to pursue empirically rigorous and culturally informed research on the unfolding social effects of the crises in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. We encourage assessment of whether race, poverty, colonial status, or other factors exacerbated the social, economic, and health problems that will inevitably be brought on by Hurricane Maria and the ongoing aftermath. Sociologists are also particularly well suited to explore factors driving short-term evacuation and longer-term relocation and migration decisions. How children

fare in new schools and how families settle into receiving communities is of particular import, as is understanding the consequences of U.S. disaster policy on long-term rebuilding decisions for the built, natural, and social environments.

Sociologists have long been at the forefront of understanding the human consequences of disasters. As they have rightly pointed out, there is no such thing as a “natural” disaster. Instead, natural hazards become disasters as a result of all-too-human decisions and, in this case, inactions.