

**Addressing the Disproportionate Effect of Natural Disasters on the Most Vulnerable in  
Puerto Rico**

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In this proposal, I am requesting funding to travel to Puerto Rico and study the current experiences of citizens of Puerto Rico, post-Hurricane Maria. Trends indicate that the most vulnerable face more difficult circumstances post-natural disaster, and the case of Puerto Rico is no different. The study will focus on community centers and neighborhoods severely affected by the hurricane in order to gain an understanding of the impact these storms have on the ability of an already struggling group to respond. This study will conduct interviews with affected individuals and volunteers working to respond post-disaster. This multi-pronged research paper will create a comparative study on the way distance from the problem, in this case a natural disaster, creates discrepancies in the proposed solutions by various groups.

## **Introduction**

The recent hurricanes in Puerto Rico frequent current news headlines. These hurricanes have left the country devastated. But what many people do not understand, beyond the surface-level devastation, is the exact level of suffering many Puerto Ricans are facing, especially the most vulnerable populations. The idea that the most vulnerable suffer disproportionately post-disaster is not a recent phenomenon. This is a trend that is apparent in disasters throughout all of history, due to many reasons, among those being the pre-existing social structures and institutions in place that affect their ability to respond post-disaster (Sjostedt 2016). What I would like to research is how this trend is once again being seen in Puerto Rico, and how it has affected vulnerable populations. In asking this question, emphasis will be placed on the voices of the affected populations in creating a comparative study of how what these individuals believe would help them aligns with what theorists propose as solutions to the problems at hand.

## **Background/Related Work and Motivation**

An important concept of studying any trend is considering it through a sociological lens. Dalton Conley's book, *You May Ask Yourself*, introduces readers to the idea of viewing the world through one's sociological imagination, or the ability to connect events within one's life to larger ideas or forces (Conley 2015). Using the framework this book provides, it is easy to begin to view current events in a new way. Recently, this was apparent in the current events in Puerto Rico. I noticed that these natural disasters affected the state in a far different manner than natural disasters affect nations like the United States.

It is important to first note that natural disasters affect every place in the world, as nature knows no bounds. However, what must be realized is that the severity with which these natural disasters affect a community differs greatly based on that place's socioeconomic status and

strength as a city, state, or nation. The mortality rate in low-and-middle-income nations (LMICs) is ten times that of high-income countries (HICs), as these LMIC's have a "higher pre-hazard vulnerability, and far fewer resources to respond to a natural hazard" (Robinson 2017). Conversely, HICs can "invest in infrastructure, strategies, and technologies to reduce disaster vulnerability, and can mobilize resources more effectively in response to a natural hazard" in a way that LMICs simply cannot (Robinson).

Included within the infrastructure that HICs have and many LMICs lack is the basic human right of healthcare. Many LMICs struggle to provide adequate healthcare even without the presence of natural disasters, but after these events, the distribution of healthcare is severely impacted. The way a state functions prior to natural disasters is critical in understanding their possible responses, and a collection of essays compiled by Virginia M. Brennan, titled, "Natural Disasters and Public Health: Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma," focuses on the efforts made post-hurricanes in the United States, and addresses possible solutions, while also considering the causes that led to increased vulnerability (Brennan 2009). While this compilation successfully addresses the events in the United States, an updated application to current events is necessary, because as demonstrated through many studies, each case is unique: every nation or state is impacted differently than another.

In applying this topic to a more similar situation, a study by Martin Sjostedt and Marina Povitkina, "Vulnerability of Small Island Developing States to Natural Disasters," looks at both the use of the word vulnerability to describe natural disasters, but also the root causes for why natural disasters have such an effect on small island developing states. They conclude that it is due to vulnerability, which stems from levels of inequality, marginalization, social injustice, environmental mismanagement due to misallocation of social capital, and poor governance of the

relationship between social systems and ecosystems (Sjostedt 2016). It looks at the effect the strength of institutions in a state has on the outcomes of natural disasters. As seen in Puerto Rico, many of these relationships between the government and citizens are strained, due to financial hardship and years-long inequity in the treatment of Puerto Ricans by the United States government. This study applies generally to Puerto Rico, but does not address the key role of the relationship between a territory and the larger nation that occupies it (Sjostedt).

This strained relationship is further understood through two articles titled, “Federal Disaster Aid for Puerto Rico Isn’t Foreign Aid—But Trump Acts That Way” and “What Every American Needs to Know About Puerto Rico’s Hurricane Disaster,” which address the current situation in Puerto Rico in accessible terms that any person can understand. These allow for a wider audience to understand the current problems facing Puerto Rico, but what they lack is an individualized account that incorporates the voices of the affected populations. This failure to represent the opinions and experiences of vulnerable groups is largely the issue I recognize within the current discourse surrounding natural disasters. I propose to visit Puerto Rico and listen to the voices of affected individuals, staff and volunteers at community and resource centers responding to the natural disasters, as well as looking deeper into the way the media portrays these disasters and the affected populations, to create a multi-faceted project comparing the various proposed solutions, and how they differ based on the distance of connection to the issue.

## **Methods**

In conducting my research, I will use qualitative research methods including participant observation and interviews. I will visit community centers and low-income neighborhoods severely affected by Hurricane Maria, primarily San Juan, over the course of approximately one

week in May 2018. This will allow me to gain an understanding of the impact these storms have on already struggling groups. Visiting San Juan will be beneficial, because as the largest city, the widest range of socioeconomic statuses will be present. With the approval of the Institutional Review Board, I will first conduct interviews with affected individuals and staff and volunteers working to respond post-disaster. In conducting these in-person semi-structured interviews, I would gain a comprehensive understanding of the philosophies and goals that drive the support services and responses, as well as a more in-depth understanding of their role in the response. I will engage in interviews with those receiving support from these organizations to present their side of the situation in light of the government and nongovernmental support, and to understand their view on what would better benefit them.

I will also study the solutions proposed by those further removed from the situation, such as previous researchers' suggestions for similarly situated nations or states. These various forms of research will create a comparative study of the responses to the natural disaster in Puerto Rico. The interviews will result primarily in qualitative findings, in the form of stories and first-hand experiences. In addition, participant observation will take place, in the form of pictures and detailed accounts of the places visited.

### **Expected Results**

The data that I obtain from interviews and participant observation will initially be condensed into a paper addressing the effect of Hurricane Maria on individuals within Puerto Rico. This paper will include a study on the solutions being proposed governmentally at the international and national levels, as well as solutions posed by the media and outside sources, in contrast to the lived experiences within the state that will be represented through interviews and first-hand experiences. The paper and its findings will be shared at Loyola Marymount

University's Undergraduate Research Symposium, and if possible, within journals such as LMU's *Attic Salt* to contribute to the diversity of research conducted through LMU.

### **Conclusion**

In conducting research on the current events in Puerto Rico post-Hurricane Maria, I will address the disproportionate suffering not only of Puerto Ricans as a group facing unfair treatment by the United States government, but I will also emphasize the individual stories of those suffering post-natural disaster. This research will highlight the disparity between the affected, the responders, and outsiders in the understanding of possible solutions after natural disasters strike, emphasizing the voice of affected individuals within a discourse dominated by people far from first-hand experiences.

## Works Cited

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## Schedule and Budget

### **Schedule**

- May 13<sup>th</sup>: Fly out of LAX to San Juan, Puerto Rico
- May 14<sup>th</sup>: Visit Project HOPE (healthcare)
- May 15<sup>th</sup>: Visit Water Mission (clean water)
- May 16<sup>th</sup>: Visit International Relief Teams (humanitarian assistance)
- May 17<sup>th</sup>: Visit San Juan Capistrano (community center)
- May 18<sup>th</sup>: Visit Puerto Rico VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster)
- May 19<sup>th</sup>: Fly out of San Juan to LAX

### **Budget**

#### Food:

- 7 days, **\$200**

#### Travel

- Flights:
  - o Los Angeles, CA → San Juan, Puerto Rico (American Airlines) **\$408**
  - o San Juan, Puerto Rico → Los Angeles, CA (American Airlines) **\$408**

#### Lodging

- Hostel: Hostel H1 Miramar
  - o \$14.40/night x 6 nights = **\$86.40**

Total: **\$1,102.40**