

# Perceived mental health issues among Puerto Rican community responders from the archipelago and the US in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria



Gabriela Madrid, Amalis Cordova-Mustafa, & Carlos E. Rodriguez-Diaz

## Introduction

- In September 2017, Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico uprooting the lives of millions of people.
- Puerto Ricans initiated much of the recovery efforts within their respective communities - in the archipelago and in the diaspora- creating an outlet for leaders to emerge.
- These leaders are unique in their communities in that they took action to help others immediately after the disaster.

## Aims

To describe the perceived mental health issues of the community responders both from the Island and the United States.

The limited research being conducted in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria focuses on the mental health of first responders, as well as, the incidence of mental illnesses after the hurricane<sup>1,2</sup>. There is a gap in research regarding the mental health of community responders. This analysis seeks to begin the conversation around the perceived mental health of community responders and their potential needs.

## Methods

- We completed a content analysis with interviews conducted in the first quarter of 2018. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, based on interviewees' preference.
- A total of 12 semi-structured interviews were analyzed; with 7 interviewees being from the diaspora and 5 interviewees being from Puerto Rico.
- There were a total of 10 themes to code the interviews using the factors that affect mental health as described in the mental health promotion framework proposed by Sharma and colleagues<sup>3</sup>.

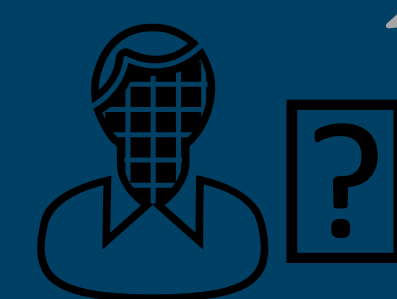
The legend below acts as a shorthand to mark the themes present in quotes :

- |                        |                    |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| Social support         | Sense of coherence |
| Stress                 | Migration          |
| Distress               | Locus of control   |
| Pre-disaster optimism  | Hardiness          |
| Post-disaster optimism | Resilience         |

## Results

"Mucha gente con severas manifestaciones de trauma, mucha tristeza, de miedo que llegara la hora de la oscuridad, por la noche. Si hacía un viento muy fuerte o una lluvia muy fuerte la gente empezaba a temblar."

*Many people with severe trauma, sadness, and from fear of darkness at night. If there was a strong wind or heavy rain the people would start to shake.*



Fernando, age 63

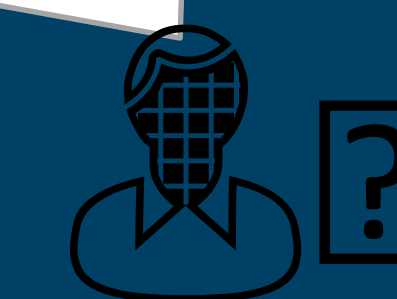
"[...] las organizaciones comunitarias fuimos las que recogimos, [...] a nosotros nos llegaban las necesidades pa' canalizarlas y a veces ni uno mismo sabía [que hacer]"

*The community organizations were the ones that picked up, you know?, the first lines of defense. There were needs to address and at times we didn't even know what to do.*



"[...]pude seguir comunicándome con él por WhatsApp, y él me empezó a mandar videos. [...] (silencio) así como estoy, así estábamos ese día, mucho ansiedad[...] [Pero] yo no me puedo quedar con los brazos cruzados.

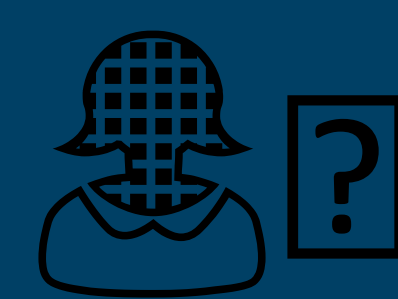
*[...] I could continue communicating through WhatsApp, and he started to send me videos [...] (silence) look how I am, that's how we were that day with a lot of anxiety [...] [But] I could not stay with my arms crossed.*



Carmelo, age 30

"Era una sensación de impotencia y de inseguridad y, y lastimaba ver los alrededores [...] Hicimos todo lo que estaba posible a nuestro alcance."

*It was this feeling of helplessness and insecurity and it hurt to see the surroundings [...] We did everything that was within our reach.*



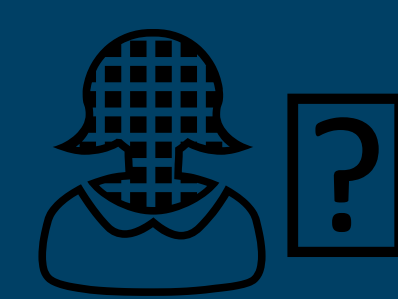
Yessenia, age 34

"Y si tomó un huracán para que la gente se diera cuenta de eso pues que pena, pero hay un sentido de unión, de unidad, de amor por la patria, por todo eso que creo que está bien fuerte ahora mismo."

*Yes, it took a hurricane for people to realize [our unity] and it's a pity, but there is a sense of unity, love for the homeland, and of everything that is what I think is really strong now.*

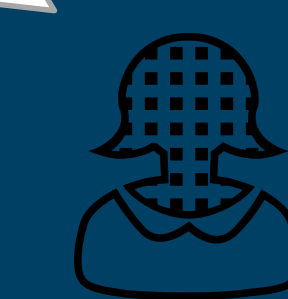
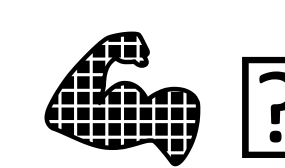


Miguel, Age 45



Yessenia, age 34

"I felt like panicked [...] I felt, like a loss of control, and that really gave me a lot of anxiety[...] What I've been doing [...] personal side of it, you know, helping my family members, coping, and helping them get their lives back together in Puerto Rico [...] and then, professionally, we did the pop-up clinics in November.



Victoria, age 34

## Discussion

- "Community is the first line of defense." Social support was common and interviewees felt that they had to care for the community.
- The post-disaster optimism seems to be linked to the reported increased in Puerto Rican pride and unity.
- We perceived a difference in the emotional response to recovery between the diaspora and those in Puerto Rico.
- There was more reported distress and stress in the diaspora group, and this may have been due to their higher intake of media during and immediately after the storm.
- Responders in Puerto Rico reported less hardiness and locus of control maybe signaling their sense of helplessness due to the lack of resources available.
- Community responders often see other's trauma, but are not necessarily equipped in how to respond which means they may need special care or even preparation.

## References

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2. Scaramutti, C., Salas-Wright, C., Vos, S., & Schwartz, S. (2019). The Mental Health Impact of Hurricane Maria on Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and Florida. *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*.
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## Acknowledgments

Our gratitude to the men and women who participated in the interviews for sharing their experiences, insights, and hopes. This research project was supported by a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation through the University of Arkansas-Canton School of Public Service, Center on Community Philanthropy. The Center's work includes a specialized focus on understanding the complexities related to racism in the United States with the goal of creating strategies for moving forward.