

New study confirms that more than 50% of Puerto Ricans have suffered trauma due to weather events ^[1]

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In its analysis, Amigxs del M.A.R. found that 44% of the total identified Hurricane María (2017) as the main event responsible for their climate trauma. (Ramon Tonito Zayas)

From anger over the thousands of deaths associated with Hurricane María and constant fear of another disaster, to sadness, anxiety, and rage over the government's failures, a study by the organization **Amigxs del M.A.R.** organization highlighted the adverse impact of the climate crisis on the mental health of Puerto Ricans, finding that more than 50% of over 700 participants reported having suffered some form of trauma due to a climate event.

The study, entitled “**Enraizando ante la Crisis Climática** (Rooting in the Face of the Climate Crisis),” was based on 684 responses to an online questionnaire (quantitative scope) and 52 people interviewed in the six regions of Puerto Rico (qualitative scope). In the analysis, Amigxs del M.A.R. found that 44% of the total identified Hurricane María (2017) as the main event responsible for their climate trauma.

“This means that people live in a state of constant hypervigilance,” said **Erimar Landrón Irizarry**, community and educational organizer for Amigxs del M.A.R. “The body constantly experiencing anxiety and stress has adverse effects on both physical and mental health. **But beyond that situation, the fact that it is adverse also causes a constant landscape of illness in the population, and when you, in one way or another, feel every day that you cannot fight that illness, it creates immobilization.** So, what actions are being taken to ensure that populations and people in communities truly feel empowered, and that it doesn't just remain a nice phrase uttered by a government official?”.

The environmental organization, founded in 1995, shared some of the findings of the research with **El Nuevo Día** ^[3]—prior to officially publishing them on Monday—which it began in August last year, seeking to formalize what they observed on a daily basis during each visit to a community or in online comments, but which had not yet been studied: the impact on mental and emotional health of phenomena such as **heavy rains, hurricanes, droughts, extreme heat, and earthquakes.**

“Having to focus on day-to-day survival immobilizes you,” Landrón Irizarry reiterated. “I think that, in **Puerto Rico, what we have here are heroes and heroines, really. After this research, I have less doubt about that.** But for us, it is very important to highlight that the results mainly reflect that Puerto Rico is not prepared to face this climate crisis.”

When dividing the data by instrument, the organization found that 65% of the 52 people interviewed and 55% of the 684 participants who responded to the closed-ended questionnaire reported having suffered trauma from an atmospheric event. Among the 52 people interviewed in person, 39 expressed sadness, 41 expressed anxiety, 35 expressed depression, and 22 expressed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

“The results of this study reflected that increased heat, coastal erosion, pollution, the lack of sound government plans for natural phenomena, and the damage we have caused to nature have detrimental effects on the emotional health of those of us who live on the islands of Puerto Rico,” reads an excerpt from the research. **“We urgently call for a rethinking of the country’s political priorities so that the climate crisis is addressed with the seriousness, agility, and sensitivity that the reality we face on the islands of Puerto Rico demands.”**

The document adds that participants reported living with multiple health conditions, “many of which are exacerbated by the effects of climate change,” including respiratory, cardiovascular, metabolic, neurological, musculoskeletal, sensory, and cancer conditions. It also highlights that participants mentioned conditions related to mobility, the digestive system, the reproductive system, and the endocrine system. In terms of mental health, it indicates that cases of anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, PTSD, insomnia, panic attacks, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were identified.

“There is a clear recognition among people that we are experiencing a climate crisis. And not only that, they are also coming together and working to tackle the climate crisis with nature in mind, and that is also very important to us, that people know that we are connected to nature, that we are part of it,” said **Gabriela Vélez Agosto**, co-executive director of Amigxs del M.A.R.

The stories

In recent years, various studies have explored the effect of climate change on mental health, even anticipating that this phenomenon will worsen the psychological and emotional well-being of people around the world, particularly for vulnerable populations and communities.

Something that stands out in Amigxs del M.A.R.’s research is the inclusion of testimonials that capture Puerto Ricans’ feelings on the subject, ranging from sharing what it means to them to live in harmony with nature, to how they have been affected by recent climate events, how they are

preparing for future emergencies, and the frustrations caused by the poor government response.

“Knowing that I am in a country that does not have the infrastructure to sustain these types of natural events **causes me a lot of anxiety, uncertainty, and anger, and that inevitably has an impact on one’s physical health**, that is, greater,” said one of the people interviewed on condition of anonymity.

One participant emphasized that actions such as storing water and canned food, cleaning their home, and “having things ready” allow them to prepare emotionally for a future event. However, other participants mentioned that it is impossible for them to prepare mentally, especially due to the aftermath of Hurricane María almost eight years ago and the earthquakes of 2020.

On the other hand, Vélez Agosto mentioned that other participants spoke about the gender violence they suffered after María. It is confirmed that this social problem is exacerbated during atmospheric or natural events.

“That’s where the question lies: what are we going to do with all this information, which confirms time and again that people feel their mental health is being affected? And now there is a more critical issue, which is awareness of the climate crisis. What, then, is the government going to do? **Are we going to continue to look the other way, or are we going to assume that there is a process that requires repairing communities, healing, and active listening?**” asked Landrón Irizarry.

Along these lines, both researchers highlighted that the study included a survey on “the Puerto Rico that people dream of.” Among the recommendations, **those interviewed urged the government to address mental and physical health, as well as to “work for the people and not for the interests of a few.”**

“I imagine a Puerto Rico built by the people, the organized people, the conscious people, the educated people, the combative people, but also the people who love from the simple things, who love their land, who love their family, who love being, who love their community,” said one participant.

Coastal Map

The Coastal Map, a tool launched by Amigxs del M.A.R. in 2023 that allows citizens to report the sale, closure of access, and destruction of **beaches**, was a key piece of the study. According to Landrón Irizarry, the initiative became an “emotional outlet” for people facing environmental threats in their surroundings.

Now, as part of the publication of the research, the organization will also launch an update to the portal on Monday, which will include new categories of complaints: debris and illegal dumps, use of motor vehicles on beaches, and discharge of water or used oils. **In addition, unlike in 2023, when only 231 complaints were collected in a month, the 2025 map will not close, and validation will take place every three months.**

“We are building tools from ourselves and for ourselves; I think that’s very important, this is something that Amigxs del M.A.R. is doing for the people of Puerto Rico. The map will not work if

people do not enter their complaints, because otherwise it will be empty. Second, the fact that we can point out and monitor the things that are happening on the coast, which have to do with displacement, which have to do with gentrification, is a way to stop it and talk about it, and this can also help us move a lot of public policy, because here we have the data. **And I think the Puerto Rico we want is a Puerto Rico where we can go and have access to the beaches,**" Vélez Agosto outlined.

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