

New Human Security Report Triggers Debate on Estimating the Human Costs of War

The Human Security Report (HSR) Project's latest publication on the human costs of wars challenges a number of widely held assumptions about global trends in wartime violence. The report claims that because current conflicts are smaller and more localized, and thanks to the dramatic increase in humanitarian assistance, national mortality rates actually fall during most wars.¹

It is well known that the lethal impact of armed conflicts extends far beyond the number of soldiers and civilians who die directly on the battlefield. Indirect victims of armed conflicts die from a variety of specific causes, usually from easily preventable diseases such as dysentery or measles, or hunger and malnutrition. These deaths are a result of the loss of access to basic health care, adequate food and shelter, clean water or other basic necessities. Two different techniques are commonly applied to collect data and estimate levels of violent deaths during armed conflicts: incident reporting and surveys.

Incident reporting documents the number of people reported to have died in a war on the basis of cross-checked media reports, official figures, and information derived from hospitals, morgues, and NGOs. Prominent examples of conflict death databases that make use of incident reporting are the Uppsala University Dataset (PRIO) or the Iraq Body Count. In countries at war, civil registration systems are often weak or manipulated for political motives. Retrospective surveys have therefore become another common standard to assess a country's humanitarian situation. Public health specialists or epidemiologists typically interview a random sample of households in a conflict setting to obtain information on population size, adult and child mortality rates, and causes of deaths. The World Health Organization (WHO) or the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) commonly make use of such survey data to estimate indirect conflict deaths by comparing the conflict mortality rate with the baseline mortality rate in times of peace.

Fundamental disagreements exist over methodologies used to count conflict deaths. Ongoing controversial discussions question whether conflict deaths have increased or decreased in recent decades. The HSR constitutes a major critique by supporters of the incident monitoring approach against experts using retrospective surveys. The authors question the use of retrospective survey-based findings to calculate mortality rates, as applied by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in a prominent report on conflict deaths in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The IRC estimated that between 1998 and 2007 a total of 5,4 million people have died as a result of the conflict.² The HSR now claims that for the period 2001 – 2007 only one third of the IRC figure can be attributed to excess deaths.

The difference between the two figures is predominantly due to the methodology used to determine the baseline mortality rate. The authors of the HSR argue that the humanitarian situation in the DRC has always been dramatic and that in the absence of

war, many more people would have died of malnutrition or lack of health care than the number put forward by the IRC.

In 2008 the Geneva Declaration Secretariat published the *Global Burden of Armed Violence* (GBAV)³ report, in which it presented global figures on direct and indirect conflict deaths. It made use of both methods, incident reporting and survey-based estimates, to calculate mortality rates. To calculate the number of direct conflict deaths, it pooled a variety of incident-based datasets. The report estimated that around 52,000 people died directly from armed conflict in an average year between 2004 and 2007. On the basis of mortality rates from 13 different conflicts around the world, it further estimated that for every person who died violently in wars around the world, another four died from war-exacerbated disease and malnutrition. With an average number of 52,000 direct conflict deaths, it is estimated that around 200,000 people have indirectly died due to armed conflict. The evidence base used to calculate this indirect-to-direct ratio of 4:1 was narrow, and there are, in fact, huge variations between countries afflicted by conflict.

The Geneva Declaration Secretariat still feels comfortable with the conservative estimates put forward in the GBAV report. Nevertheless, it considers the HSR an important contribution to the debate on how to research the human costs of war. Previous articles on this debate include Christopher Murray et al (2002)⁴, Ziad Obermayer et al (2008)⁵ or Spagat et al (2009)⁶. The Geneva Declaration Secretariat further applauds the engagement of many scholars in improving the quality of data collection methods tools such as the Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transition (SMART) initiative and the Complex Emergency Database (CE-DAT) project.

Understanding the geographical and demographic pattern of direct and indirect conflict death rates is crucial, not only to enable practitioners to design adequate responses, but also to promote meaningful strategies for the reconciliation of war-torn societies, reparations, and other forms of transitional justice. At the same time, the Geneva Declaration Secretariat also wants to emphasize the importance of looking at non-conflict situations. The number of people killed in criminal and interpersonal violence is double the number of direct and indirect conflict deaths combined. Programming efforts must also be undertaken to prevent and reduce homicides, crimes, and incidences of sexual and domestic violence worldwide.

¹ Human Security Report Project. 2010. *The Shrinking Costs of War*, Part II of the *Human Security Report 2009*. Available online at:

http://www.humansecurityreport.info/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=205&Itemid=91

² International Rescue Committee. 2007. *Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo – An Ongoing Crisis*. Available online at: http://www.theirc.org/sites/default/files/migrated/resources/2007/2006-7_congomortalitysurvey.pdf

³ Geneva Declaration Secretariat. 2008. *Global Burden of Armed Violence*. Available online at:

<http://www.genevadeclaration.org/fileadmin/docs/Global-Burden-of-Armed-Violence-full-report.pdf>

⁴ Murray, Christopher, et al. 2002. *Armed conflict as a public health problem*. *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 324, pp.346–9.

⁵ Obermeyer, Ziad, Christopher J L Murray, Emmanuela Gakidou .2008. *Fifty years of violent war deaths from Vietnam to Bosnia: analysis of data from the world health survey programme*. *British Medical Journal*, vol. 336, pp.1482–1486.

⁶ Spagat, Michael, Andrew Mack, Tara Cooper and Joakim Kreutz .2009. *Estimating War Deaths: An Arena of Contestation*. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 53, p. 934.