

New Study: ORB Poll Estimate of One Million Iraqis Killed is Fundamentally Flawed

In September of 2007 a British polling company named ORB released an alarming estimate of “more than 1,000,000 Iraqis murdered” in the Iraq war ([updated version here](#)). ORB’s poll-based estimate has been cited approvingly in much of the blogosphere, a number of mainstream media outlets and academic publications, and in official statements from the Bloomberg School of Public Health of Johns Hopkins University in support of their own work in this area.

[“Conflict Deaths in Iraq: A Methodological Critique of the ORB Survey Estimate”](#) by Michael Spagat and Josh Dougherty, just published in [Survey Research Methods](#), describes in detail how the ORB poll is riddled with critical inconsistencies and methodological shortcomings. This first and only peer-reviewed analysis of the ORB estimate concludes that it is too flawed, exaggerated and ill-founded to contribute to discussion of the human costs of the Iraq war. *Survey Research Methods* also publishes [a reply from Johnny Heald of ORB and our response to Heald’s piece](#).

An internal validity check of ORB data across three separate polls reveals internal contradictions indicative of compromised data collection practices which greatly exaggerate the resulting estimate (section 4 of the paper). In particular, four governorates in central Iraq account for more than 80% of ORB’s estimated one million deaths. Yet in these governorates a higher percentage of respondents report deaths of *household* members than report deaths of *extended family* members in another ORB poll conducted only six months earlier. This pattern can not be seen as credible since extended family networks are far larger than households. The percentage reporting deaths in the entire southern region of Iraq, on the other hand, does show the expected sharp drop between the two polls (from 35 to 7 percent) when ORB switches from its extended-family question to its household question. This more reasonable pattern casts strong doubt on precisely the data (in the four key central governorates) which provided the vast bulk (more than 80%) of deaths in the “million” figure.

The ORB poll is also marred by a number of serious quality problems including (sections 2, 3, 5 and 6):

- a claimed margin of error of plus or minus 8% that is unrealistically narrow;
- critical problems with ORB’s published mortality question that invite respondents to report both non-violent deaths and deaths of extended family members in what is purportedly a household survey measuring “murders”;
- a failure to disclose key methodological information such as the exact wordings of its questions as asked in the field, i.e., in Arabic and Kurdish;
- an inadequate treatment of non-response in which ORB assumes that death rates of non-respondents were identical to those of responding households;

An external validity check exposes the ORB data as inconsistent with a large number of credible sources (section 7). The ORB estimate can find partial company only with the

[widely criticized](#) *Lancet* estimate from 2006, although these two outlying sources still differ strongly from one another on the geographical pattern of deaths (see section 1 for sources critical of the [Lancet estimate](#)).

Michael Spagat of Royal Holloway, University of London said “the ORB poll is not a serious piece of research and should never have seen the light of day.” Josh Dougherty of Iraq Body Count added that “there has been terrible carnage in the Iraq war but no useful purpose is served by promoting inflated death toll estimates.”

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