



A war's toll. The release of study data hasn't calmed a debate over the number of violence-related deaths in Iraq.

EPIDEMIOLOGY

Iraq Mortality Study Authors Release Data, but Only to Some

The authors of a controversial study on conflict-related deaths in Iraq are seeking to diffuse criticism by releasing their raw data. But the move has hardly settled the debate. Critics say the authors have withheld key details needed to check the study. And some are outraged by the conditions set for who can have the data, including the requestor's "objectivity."

The paper, published in *The Lancet* last October by a U.S. and Iraqi team, estimated that 655,000 more people have died than normally would have since the March 2003 U.S. invasion—more than 10 times any official estimate. The authors got this result by extrapolating from mortality data collected through door-to-door surveys. Other academics have questioned aspects of the study, from whether the interviews could have been done as quickly as claimed, to whether the results were inflated by surveying only households near main streets vulnerable to bombs and shootings (*Science*, 20 October 2006, p. 396).

Lead author Gilbert Burnham's team at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, had resisted calls to release the raw data, citing possible danger to the Iraqi interviewees and the survey participants. Earlier this month, however, Burnham and his team posted a note on their Web site saying they would release a data set stripped of information that might reveal identities—but only to qualified scientific groups. Such groups must have expertise in biostatistics and epidemiology, the note says, and must also be "without publicly stated views that would cause doubt about their objectivity in analyzing the data." The Hopkins team says several groups have received the data.

But at least one researcher has been turned down: Michael Spagat, an economist and expert on conflict studies at Royal Holloway, University of London, in Egham, who has

been a proponent of the street-bias idea. Burnham, e-mailing from Jordan, declined to explain which criteria Spagat did not meet; co-author Les Roberts, now at Columbia University, says he wasn't involved in the decision but that Spagat "would not meet the criteria by multiple measures."

Spagat calls the policy "deeply flawed," adding, "If we do something dumb or non-objective with the data, qualified people should be able to expose our stupidity." The decision also puzzles David Kane, a fellow at the Harvard Institute for Quantitative Social Science who has received the data set even though he says he posted comments on a Web log last fall that raised the possibility of fraud. Denying some critics access "is ridiculous," Kane adds.

One epidemiologist apart from the fray agrees that the conditions are unusual: "I am wary of trying to limit access based on the predilections of those requesting it," says David Savitz of Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. But Allen Wilcox, editor-in-chief of *Epidemiology*, defends the conditions set by the Hopkins group: "I can hardly blame [them] for being cautious in this case," says Wilcox, because the topic is so politically charged.

Others are concerned that the group's decision to withhold information such as main street names and the sampling protocol has made it impossible to detect street bias or other potential problems. More details on the interviews "are necessary if the authors are to lay to rest intimations of 'fabricated' data," says Madelyn Hicks, a psychiatrist and public health researcher at King's College London. Burnham says his group "envision[s] no additional release of materials."

—JOCELYN KAISER

With reporting by John Bohannon.

Human—Not Martian—Error Cited

Mars Global Surveyor (MGS) went silent last November after orbiting the planet for 10 years, not from old age but because of a software error. A NASA investigative board report has concluded that the mission operations team sent a software update months before to the wrong part of the spacecraft's computer memory, wreaking havoc on the spacecraft after Surveyor received a routine command. An antiquated onboard fault-protection system subsequently misinterpreted the situation, and within 2 hours Surveyor had died of insufficient battery recharging.

Like other NASA missions extended far beyond their promised design lifetime, MGS had suffered reductions in its operations budget and staffing. "We didn't find that any decrease directly caused the anomaly," said board chair Dolly Perkins of Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland. But she said, "It's beneficial to step back and see what risks from aging and changes in operations" might be developing. That lesson is being applied to all Mars missions as well as ones taking the better part of a decade to reach targets such as Mercury and Pluto. —RICHARD A. KERR

Sensor Move Deemed Sensible

NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration last week restored a key environmental sensor to a long-awaited satellite demonstration mission due to be launched in 2009. But researchers are giving the move only one thumb up: The agencies haven't decided whether to restore the sensor, called the Ozone Mapping and Profiler Suite Limb (OMPS-Limb), to six planned satellites that make up the troubled National Polar-Orbiting Operational Environmental Satellite System (NPOESS).

OMPS-Limb, which will provide ozone-distribution data for environmental and climate studies, was knocked off the NPOESS demo and the main satellites to save money (*Science*, 16 June 2006, p. 1580). But in a March letter to the White House, House Science and Technology Committee leadership pointed out that the sensor for the demo had already been built and that it wouldn't cost any more to fly it on the demo.

Remote-sensing expert Berrien Moore of the University of New Hampshire, Durham, applauded the restoration of OMPS-Limb but also wants it on the NPOESS flights "as an operational sensor." A House Science committee staffer says members will continue their push to make that happen.

—ELI KINTISCH