

April 23, 2010

Newly Published Paper finds Ethical Violations and Evidence of Data Fabrication and Falsification in *Lancet* Study of Iraq War Deaths

The latest issue of [*Defense and Peace Economics*](#) publishes the final version of the paper [“Ethical and Data-Integrity Problems in the Second *Lancet* Survey of Mortality in Iraq”](#) by Michael Spagat of Royal Holloway, University of London. This paper analyses the high-profile Burnham et al. (2006) survey that estimated 601,000 violent deaths in the Iraq war and finds it unreliable, invalid and unethical. All credible evidence suggests that a large number of people have been killed in the Iraq war. However, injecting inflated and unsupportable numbers into this discussion undermines our understanding of the conflict and could incite further violence.

Evidence of data fabrication and falsification divides into nine broad categories (In addition see [this presentation](#) and [this short summary](#)).

- (1) Evidence suggesting that the figure of 601,000 violent deaths was extrapolated from two earlier surveys.
- (2) Shortcomings of disclosure, including on the questionnaire, data-entry form, sample design, and data for matching interviews with anonymized interviewer IDs.
- (3) Improbable response rates and success rates in visiting selected clusters despite highly insecure conditions.
- (4) The presence of many known risk factors for fabrication listed in a joint document of the American Association for Public Opinion Research and the American Statistical Association.
- (5) A claimed fieldwork schedule that appears to be impossible, at least without committing ethical transgressions in the field.
- (6) Large discrepancies with other data sources on the scale, location and timing of violent deaths in Iraq in ways that are consistent with fabrication and the use of a trend figure (Section 3.8) that hides these timing discrepancies.
- (7) Evidence of fabrication in a particular Baghdad cluster (cluster 33) combined with the implausible claim of zero security-related failures to visit Baghdad clusters during a period when Baghdad was very insecure; and further evidence of fabrication in a cluster in Nineveh (cluster 34).
- (8) Unlikely patterns in the confirmations of violent deaths through the viewing of death certificates and in the patterns on when deaths certificates were requested and when they were not requested.

(9) Manipulation of other evidence on mortality in Iraq and material that is not relevant to mortality in Iraq or unsuitable for citation in a scientific publication.

A few of these anomalies could occur by chance but it is extremely unlikely that all of them could have occurred randomly and simultaneously.

The Spagat paper also presents evidence suggesting ethical violations to the survey's respondents including endangerment, privacy breaches and violations in obtaining informed consent. There also have been ethical breaches of minimal disclosure standards in survey research (point 2 above).

Serious violations of minimal disclosure standards have already been [confirmed in an investigation by the standards committee of the American Association for Public Opinion \(AAPOR\)](#) that resulted in a rare formal censure because Gilbert Burnham, the principal investigator of the survey, "repeatedly refused to make public essential facts about his research" At the time, Richard Kulka, AAPOR's president, wrote:

"When researchers draw important conclusions and make public statements and arguments based on survey research data, then subsequently refuse to answer even basic questions about how their research was conducted, this violates the fundamental standards of science, seriously undermines open public debate on critical issues, and undermines the credibility of all survey and public opinion research." ([AAPOR, 2009](#))

[For further details on the AAPOR investigation see this document.](#) Serious ethical breaches have also been [confirmed by an investigation of Johns Hopkins University](#) that resulted in the suspension of Gilbert Burnham for five years from being a principal investigator on human subject research.

Defense and Peace Economics invited a response from the authors of the Burnham et al. (2006) paper but the authors did not provide one.

Michael Spagat says that "In light of these findings, Burnham *et al.* (2006a) cannot be considered a reliable contribution to knowledge about mortality during the Iraq war."

For more information contact:

Professor Michael Spagat
Department of Economics
Royal Holloway, University of London
M.Spagat@rhul.ac.uk
<http://personal.rhul.ac.uk/uhte/014/Research.htm>