

Academic finds evidence of data fabrication in Iraqi death toll report

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Research by Professor Michael Spagat of the Department of Economics at Royal Holloway, University of London, examining the Iraq war death toll, is published in the latest issue of 'Defense and Peace Economics'.

Professor Spagat's research analyses the high-profile Burnham et al (2006) survey that estimated 601,000 violent deaths in the Iraq [war](#) and says it is unreliable, invalid and unethical and resulted in an exaggeration of the [death toll](#).

“According to the study 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”, says Professor Spagat.

Entitled ‘Ethical and Data-Integrity Problems in the Second Lancet Survey of Mortality in Iraq’, the paper divides the evidence of data fabrication and falsification into nine broad categories and includes: Evidence suggesting that the figure of 601,000 violent deaths was extrapolated from two earlier surveys and 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.

Professor Spagat says a few of these anomalies could occur by chance but it is extremely unlikely that all of them could have occurred randomly and simultaneously. (All nine categories can be viewed by visiting personal.rhul.ac.uk/uhte/014/press%20release_ethics%20and%20data%20integrity_long%20version.pdf)

Professor Spagat’s paper also presents evidence suggesting ethical violations to the survey’s respondents including endangerment, privacy breaches and violations in obtaining informed consent. 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)

Serious ethical breaches have also been confirmed by an investigation of

John 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.

Professor Spagat says that “In light of these findings, Burnham et al (2006) cannot be considered a reliable contribution to knowledge about mortality during the [Iraq](#) war.”

For open access to the full paper visit:

www.informaworld.com/smpp/content=921401057 .

Provided by Royal Holloway, University of London

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