

Behind the Numbers:

SMALL ARMS AND CONFLICT DEATHS

Media reports from conflict zones often include estimated numbers of deaths due to fighting. For some populations and groups, such estimates can appear very precise—the numbers of US and UK servicemen and women killed in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq are recent examples. But in general, the lack of reliable data makes putting numbers on civilian and military deaths difficult. Depending on the sources and estimation techniques used, figures can vary significantly.

The large discrepancies in mortality estimates—and the political implications they entail—raise important questions about how conflict dead are measured and reported, for both individual conflicts and global aggregate measures of armed conflict. This chapter surveys the range of estimation techniques, from media report datasets to focused case studies that are used to derive conflict death figures. It also discusses the strengths and weaknesses of different methodologies.

The chapter finds that the most recent global estimates of direct conflict deaths underreport the magnitude of the human death toll, primarily because they depend on incomplete media reports. The media constitutes an important source of information on the extent of casualties, but due to a range of factors, including prohibitions on access and personal security threats, journalists are not able to cover all incidents or every death that occurs. Further, it is often difficult for journalists to check the reliability and comprehensiveness of the information gathered from second-hand sources in conflict zones.

The extent to which the media underreports incidents varies. In the conflicts in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guatemala, Iraq, Kosovo, and Peru, comparisons between media-based counts and results from estimation techniques suggest that journalists report about one-quarter to one-half of all conflict incidents. The more intense a conflict is, and the more aggressively authorities try to keep reporters away, the more difficult it is for journalists to document the full extent of conflict deaths. Based on other sources of information, including epidemiological surveys, the chapter suggests that the direct death toll for people killed by conflict violence in 2003 was between two and four times higher than has been reported by recent studies that rely heavily on media reports. The total number of direct conflict deaths was probably between 80,000 and 108,000 in 2003, the latest year for which data is available.

The human toll from armed conflict, however, is significantly higher than the number of those killed directly by violence. *Indirect* deaths arising from consequences of fighting such as illness, disease, and starvation are often greater than *direct* conflict deaths. The data on such mortality rates is limited; however, case studies suggest that the average crude mortality rate in sub-Saharan African countries affected by conflict is more than twice what would be expected as the natural mortality rate, and in some refugee settings it may be more than eight times higher. These factors highlight the magnitude of the impact of conflict on an entire population and especially vulnerable groups. The figures for indirect deaths thus reach far beyond the number of direct combat deaths.



A UN peacekeeper takes notes at a mass grave in Gatumba, Burundi, in August 2004.

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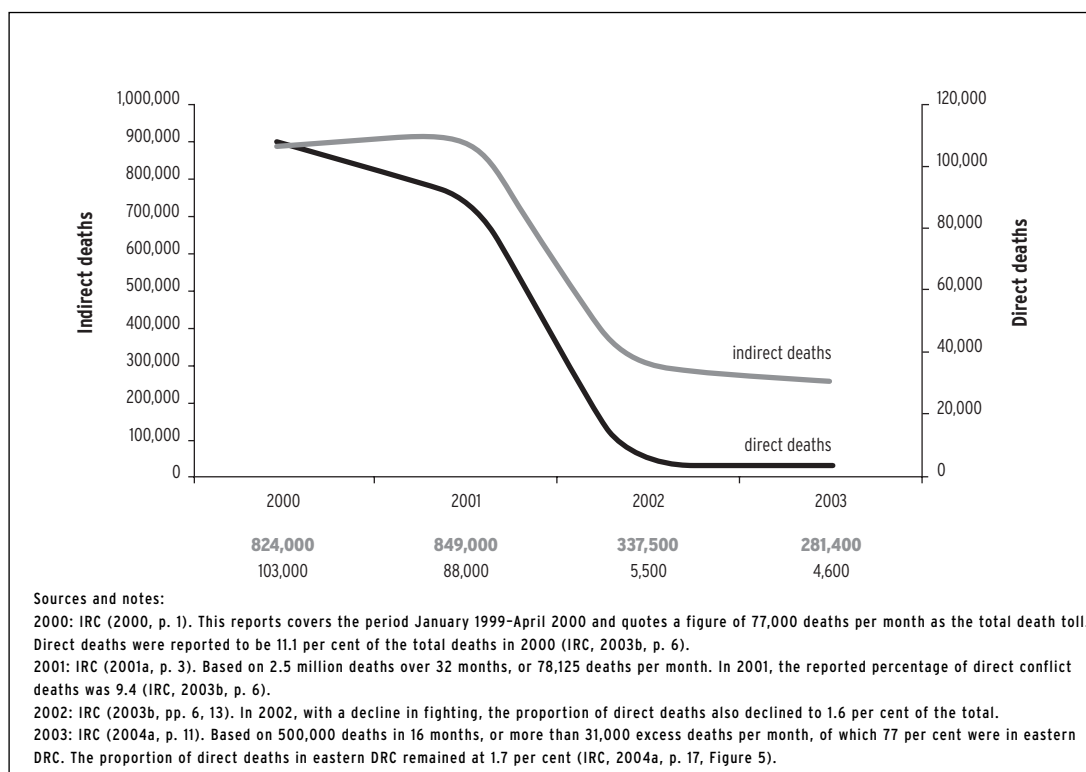
Medical staff examine an eight-year-old girl who is suffering from malnourishment in a Sudanese IDP camp in June 2004. The girl and her family fled their village after Janjaweed Arab militants burnt it down.

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The relationship between direct and indirect conflict deaths varies between settings. In some conflicts, the majority of victims die from violence, as is suggested by recent data for Iraq and Kosovo. In sub-Saharan Africa, however, the situation is reversed. Available data indicates that only about one-quarter of the total deaths can be attributed to the use of violence.

High mortality rates also decline more slowly than direct death rates; they remain elevated long after the formal end of the conflict, partly because it can be more time-consuming to restore health infrastructures, services, and security than to negotiate the ceasefire, or even to demobilize combatants.

Figure 9.3 Decline in indirect and direct deaths in DRC based on IRC studies



Small arms and light weapons are responsible for the majority—between 60 to 90 per cent—of all direct conflict deaths depending on the nature of fighting.

Small arms are an important feature in all of today's conflicts: they are responsible for the majority—between 60 to 90 per cent—of all direct conflict deaths, depending on the nature of fighting. They also play a clear, but unquantifiable role in causing the indirect deaths from conflict. Finally, the presence of small arms in conflict increases the intensity of other forms of violence. During the 1994 Rwandan genocide small arms were used to round up people who were later killed by machete. The guns were instrumental in those killings; without them, the coercion necessary to detain large numbers of people would not have been possible.