

# Analysis of violent deaths of Iraqi civilians between 2003-2008

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A paper published in this week's issue of *PLoS Medicine* provides the most detailed assessment thus far of civilian deaths in the course of the recent Iraq war. Madelyn Hsiao-Rei Hicks from King's College London, UK and colleagues analyzed data from Iraq Body Count (IBC), a nongovernmental project that collates media reports of deaths of individual Iraqi civilians and cross-checks these reports with data from hospitals, morgues, nongovernmental organizations, and official figures.

The authors studied 92,614 Iraqi civilian direct deaths from the IBC database that occurred as a result of armed violence between March 20, 2003 and March 19, 2008. The authors found that most Iraqi civilian violent deaths during this time were inflicted by unknown perpetrators, primarily through extrajudicial executions that were disproportionately increased in Iraqi governorates with greater numbers of violent deaths. Unknown perpetrators also used suicide bombs, vehicle bombs, and mortars that had highly lethal and indiscriminate effects on Iraqi civilians. Deaths caused by Coalition forces of Iraqi civilians, of women and children, and of Iraqi civilians from air attacks, peaked during the invasion in 2003.

Detailed analysis of civilian deaths during wars can improve the understanding of the impact on vulnerable subgroups in the population, such as women and children. In order to assess this impact further, the researchers calculated the proportion of women and children among civilian deaths identified as men, women or children. This proportion is termed the "Dirty War Index" (DWI), and indicates the scale of

indiscriminate killing in a conflict. The most indiscriminate effects on women and children in Iraq were from unknown perpetrators firing mortars (DWI = 79) and using nonsuicide vehicle bombs (DWI = 54), and from Coalition air attacks (DWI = 69). Coalition forces had a higher DWI than anti-coalition forces for all weapons combined, and for small arms gunfire, with no decrease over the study period.

The authors conclude that "Our findings on civilian deaths from perpetrators and their weapons during 5 years of the [Iraq war](#) illustrate the feasibility as well as the public health and humanitarian potential of detailed tracking of war's effects on a civilian population."

In a Perspective article published the same day in *PLoS Medicine*, Robert Muggah from the Small Arms Survey at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland (uninvolved in the research) discusses the costs of war and this new analysis by Hicks and colleagues documenting the number of Iraqi civilian violent deaths during 2003-2008.

**More information:** Hicks MH-R, Dardagan H, Guerrero Serdan G, Bagnall PM, Sloboda JA, et al. (2011) Violent Deaths of Iraqi Civilians, 2003: Analysis by Perpetrator, Weapon, Time, and Location. *PLoS Med* 8(2): e1000415. [doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1000415](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000415)

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