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Title

Press Release: New calculations show as many as 7.3 million Americans know someone killed or injured in Iraq and Afghanistan

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/32b5t8ts>

Journal

Structure and Dynamics, 1(4)

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Publication Date

2006-09-08

DOI

10.5070/SD914003285

Peer reviewed

Millions of Americans Know Someone Killed or Injured in Iraq, Afghanistan

The social effect of those deaths and injuries stretches beyond those directly affected to their social network -- family, friends and acquaintances

Monday, December 11, 2006

DURHAM, NC -- Between 4.3 million and 6.5 million Americans are likely to know someone who has been killed or injured in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to new estimates by a Duke University sociologist.

Although the number of soldiers killed or wounded is known, the social effect of those deaths and injuries stretches beyond those directly affected to their social network -- family, friends and acquaintances -- which is harder to count but likely important in shaping beliefs and behaviors.

"We look at the news and it seems like something in a movie far away," said James Moody, associate professor of sociology at Duke. "It's very different when there's an empty chair at the Christmas table."

Moody, who published his peer-reviewed findings in "Structure and Dynamics: eJournal of Anthropological and Related Sciences," offers estimates of the war's impact on Americans and on people living in Iraq and Afghanistan, using generally accepted estimation techniques from social networks.

In the paper, Moody used U.S. Defense Department counts of the number of U.S. soldiers killed and wounded. But because the number is constantly changing, Moody also created an online calculator to estimate the war's effect. It can be found at <http://repositories.cdlib.org/imbs/socdyn/sdeas/vol1/iss2/art9/>.

It's important to understand this magnifying effect when calculating the human cost of the war, he said.

"We have this lone cowboy model of social life. But we all have friends, we all have family," he said. "Let's think about how these events really affect whole communities."

In the paper, Moody also estimates how many people in Iraq and Afghanistan know people who have been killed in the war or detained by the U.S. -- a number which has implications for the U.S., he said.

“It seems reasonable to think that some proportion of people who have had their brother or cousin die might raise up arms against us,” he said. “As the numbers killed go up, the number of affected kin rises dramatically.”

He said he got the idea for the paper after listening to a letter read on National Public Radio in which a listener commented that nobody knows how many people are affected by the war’s casualties.

“I thought, ‘That’s not true. We can know, within ranges,’” he said. In sociology, the problem the listener described is known as the “network scale-up” problem, and has been studied extensively by social scientists, he said.

So, using accepted estimates of family and friend networks, casualty estimates of 2,888 soldiers killed and just under 20,000 wounded, and a formula for estimating social networks, Moody came up with a range of how many Americans know someone who has been killed or wounded. If one then considers how many people know soldiers either killed or wounded, the total range is 4.3 to 6.5 million.

The formula is designed to account for the fact that people share some family and friends, and to prevent double-counting someone who might know more than one soldier.

The calculation uses an extended family size of 26 to 49 members and a U.S. population of 280 million.

Using this formula, Moody figures that between 75,000 and 141,000 Americans have a family member who has been killed in Iraq, and 519,000 to 978,000 people have a family member who has been wounded.

When the circle is expanded to acquaintances, the number rises to between 554,000 and 836,000 people who know someone who has been killed, and between 3.8 million and 5.7 million who know someone who has been injured. The number of acquaintances is estimated to range between 192 and 290. Acquaintances are defined as two people who, at a minimum, know each other’s names.

Using the same ranges of the number of family members and acquaintances, Moody also estimated that between 1 million and 1.9 million people in Iraq and Afghanistan have a family member killed and between 7.1 million and 10.3 million people have an acquaintance who has been killed. Between 775,000 and 1.5 million people have a family member detained by the United States and between 5.5 million and 8 million people have an acquaintance who has been detained.

The numbers of non-Americans killed and wounded, especially civilians, is difficult to measure. The numbers in the study are based on an estimated 39,460 civilians who have died as a result of coalition action and 30,000 people detained as enemy combatants. The estimate of Iraqi deaths comes from Iraq Body Count, a volunteer group keeping a record of

media-reported civilian deaths. The estimate of detainees comes from a March 2005 report by Human Rights First. The calculations are further based on an estimated combined population in Iraq and Afghanistan of 53 million people.

As for Americans' response, Moody said he thinks the rising number of people who know others who have been killed or injured in the war will affect public opinion, although it's difficult to predict how.

“As more people know a soldier killed in Iraq, it's going to make the cost of the war more real and immediate,” he said. “It's an interesting question as to whether it will cause a greater rallying around the troops or the magnification of the Vietnam effect -- once the cost gets so high, you want to leave.”

http://www.dukenews.duke.edu/2006/12/iraq_calculator.html