PAPER 2: DEFINITION AND CATEGORIZATION IN CASUALTY RECORDING

Elizabeth Minor

The form used by Documenta, Croatia, to record information about casualties. (© Igor Roginek/Documenta)

1 This is the second paper in the collection “Good Practice in Conflict Casualty Recording: Testimony, Detailed Analysis and Recommendations From a Study of 40 Casualty Recorders”

www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection

2 Elizabeth Minor is the Research Officer of the Every Casualty programme at Oxford Research Group (ORG)
We welcome feedback and comments on our work. If you would like to discuss any aspect of this study, please contact Elizabeth Minor, Research Officer at Oxford Research Group elizabeth.minor@oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk.
ABOUT THIS PAPER
This paper is one of five that make up the collection ‘Good Practice in Conflict Casualty Recording: Testimony, Detailed Analysis and Recommendations From a Study of 40 Casualty Recorders’. The general contents and other papers in the collection can be found at www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection. The information and analysis in this paper is drawn from a survey of forty casualty recorders, conducted in 2011 by Oxford Research Group (ORG).

The survey consisted of an online questionnaire and an in-depth interview with each recorder, asking a detailed series of questions about the organisation and their work to record casualties. The questions covered areas such as: the definitions used by recorders in their work; their sources and confirmation methods; the challenges they face and the things that help them; how they release the information they collect; their aims and audiences; and how their work is used. For a definition of what we mean by casualty recording, please see the first paper in the collection, ‘An Overview of the Field’.

The recorders surveyed were almost all civil society organisations. They worked to document deaths from conflicts across the world, in Europe, Asia, Africa and South America. Some worked in conflict zones; some worked from outside them; and some worked towards a full accounting of the deaths from conflicts where violence has now ceased. We promised anonymity to all the organisations that took part in the survey, especially as some face considerable danger in their work. Therefore, specific details that could identify organisations have been removed, including the country in which they operated.

These papers are aimed primarily at those who record casualties, are intending to do this work, or are interested in understanding casualty recording practice better. They are structured in such a way as to allow readers to seek out the themes that most interest them, and skip over other content. Where discussions in one section refer to those of another, a link or page reference will be given. Because we have structured the papers into discrete themes relating to different issues, some points of analysis may be repeated in the context of different papers.

All analysis and examples given in these papers are drawn directly from the work of the casualty recorders who took part in the survey. (Though this does not mean that they agree with the conclusions we have drawn, for which ORG alone is responsible.)

For more information on how we conducted this study, please see the ‘Appendix on Survey Methodology’. For an introduction to and general discussion of the range of practice in casualty recording, please see ‘An Overview of the Field’ (both these papers can be found at the link above). Along with the five papers in this collection, we have also produced from this study a policy paper aimed at a wider audience: ‘Towards the Recording of Every Casualty: Analysis and Policy Recommendations from a Study of 40 Casualty Recorders’ www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/recording_practice_policy_paper.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 What is the Purpose of this Paper?

This paper explores the importance of the definitions and categories that casualty recorders use in their work, and the issues that recorders face both in creating these and categorising events and victims by them. Whilst giving some recommendations on general principles of good practice in this area, this paper does not intend to give specific guidelines, but to present some observations about the field that might be useful for recorders’ own reflections on practice. Clear and well-elaborated definitions and categories can be crucial to recorders, especially for helping others to understand their work. One aim of this paper is to demonstrate that robust definitions and categories are a key aspect of good practice.

However, it is not straightforward to develop and apply definitions and categories in casualty recording. In order to demonstrate this, this paper describes how recorders approached two key issues in definition and categorisation: inclusion criteria and status categories. The discussion of differences in approach to these issues will refer to the model of five approaches to casualty recording identified by this study, described in
section 2.3 of ‘An Overview of the Field’. The aim of examining these issues is to reflect the field, presenting key dilemmas and approaches to current and would-be recorders, situating their work within a broader picture.

How definitions and categories are developed and used can depend on contextual factors such as the sources available to recorders and the types of investigations they can do. The last section of this paper summarises the key issues recorders should consider when developing definitions and categorisations, and the sources that recorders used to create definitions and categories. It also looks at the issue of standardising definitions and categories across the field, and whether this is possible or desirable for recorders.

The paper begins by setting out what we mean by definitions and categorisations, followed by a general discussion of why this issue is an important theme in practice.

1.2 What do we mean by Definitions and Categorisations?
Casualty recorders collect pieces of information like dates, locations, names, the combat status of victims, and the weapons used in incidents of violence.

When we refer to categories or categorisations in this paper, we are talking about how recorders divide up the ‘answers’ to these pieces of information. For example, the piece of information ‘combat status’ may be divided into the categories ‘civilian’ and ‘combatant’. These categories answer the question of the combat status of victims.

When we refer to definitions in this paper, we are talking about how recorders describe these categories, or the broader pieces of information they collect. Definitions can be key to decision making in casualty recording. The description of the category ‘civilian’ is a definition that will be used by recorders to decide which victims were ‘civilian’.

Definitions and categorisations are very closely linked, and are discussed simultaneously in this paper.

1.3 Why are Definitions and Categorisations an Important Issue in Casualty Recording?
Definitions and categorisations are important in a basic way to how recorders process information, and to how others see their work. The work of the casualty recorders interviewed for this project and the examples they gave show several reasons why the issue is significant, set out below:

1.3.1 For Methodical Procedures, and Making Records Consistent and Reliable
Most recorders sought to analyse their information about casualties according to different categories. For example, many wanted to look at what proportion of those killed were civilians, or how many people different types of weapons had killed. Others needed to break down or disaggregate their information for other reasons.

For several casualty recorders who described the development of their projects, drawing up categories and defining them was a crucial step. These defined categories were needed so that they could be applied during the analysis of source material and the recording of information in a system. Defined categories were important in order for those working on the project to do so methodically, and to produce information that was consistent and so more reliable, as well as easier to analyse. The process of developing categories involved dividing up information about incidents, combat status, perpetrators, weapons and so on into different defined categories within a spreadsheet, database or form.

Recording can involve ambiguity and will require subjective judgements (see sections 2.2 and 3.3 in the paper ‘Evaluating Sources’). However, most recorders needed set categories for analysis, and definitions so that the different individual interpretations of those working on a project would not create records that were inconsistent and so less reliable.

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3 For other papers in the collection see www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection
4 Refer to other papers as per previous footnote
"I put very strict outlines on the definition of what, who is a civilian... that was one of the points that I spent the longest part of the training on, to make sure that individual preferences of [workers] will not alter [the record]."

Some recorders expressed the view that casualty figures were only as good as the definitions, categories and methodologies that they were built on, and that these were key to how others should consider and interpret recorders’ results.

“If you don’t get down to the really hard criteria that you’re using, the information you’re producing is junk, you know garbage in, garbage out.”

Recorders employed different strategies to ensure that definitions and categories were applied correctly, including training sessions and writing guidelines or handbooks for reference. Having different stages of checking in their recording procedure, and having space for the discussion of ambiguous cases, was also reported to be useful. (These are general good practices in recording; see section 3.2 of ‘An Overview of the Field’ and section 2.3 and 3.6 of ‘Evaluating Sources’).

Some of those who discussed the issue thought that it was important to develop definitions and categorisations before starting recording, to ensure consistency, to make sure the information would fit the purpose for which it was intended, and because altering definitions and categorisations later could create a lot of work. However, several recorders also reported that their methodologies changed in response to the needs of audiences or those who were using the information. Methodologies also evolved from the experience of doing recording: it was not always possible to develop the most useful definitions and categories in advance, even though this was desirable.

Developing definitions and categories could be made easier for practitioners through knowledge of the decisions that others have made in this area. Further to the general points made in this paper, it could also be useful to the work of current and future casualty recorders for recorders to share their definitions and categories with each other; within the International Practitioner Network of casualty recorders overseen by Oxford Research Group; and publicly or with those they share information with, as long as it is safe to do so.

1.3.2 For the Comparison of Different Information about Casualties

Definitions and categorisations are important for comparing information, both in recorders’ investigations and to others who use their work.

Several recorders reported that discrepancies in casualty information between different sources that they used, and between their work and that of others documenting the same conflict, could be explained either by differences in definitions and categorisations, or because clear and consistent definitions were not available. For example, a lack of consensus between different institutions on how civilians should be defined, and which individual victims should be categorised as civilians or not, were noted by different casualty recorders as creating differences between lists. Knowing what definitions or categorisations were being used meant that information could be more easily compared or reconciled with the recorders’ own records.

### Good practice in developing and applying definitions and categorisations:
- Produce written guidelines or handbooks
- Consistently train workers in definitions and categories
- Implement multiple stage checking procedures to ensure that definitions and categories are consistently applied
- Have structures or space for discussion of difficult cases
- Develop definitions and categories in advance as much as is possible, but be prepared for these to evolve to meet challenges in the handling of data, and the needs of audiences

### Good practice for information sharing:
- Openly available definitions and categorisations help different recorders compare information more easily between themselves
- Transparent definitions and categories also mean other users can compare, use and integrate recorders’ information more easily

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5 For other papers in the collection see [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection)

6 See [www.everycasualty.org/practice/ipn](http://www.everycasualty.org/practice/ipn). For more information about the network, or if you are a casualty recorder and would like to join, contact Hana Salama hana.salama@oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk
For the same reason, definitions and categorisations are important to effective information sharing and comparison between different recorders. Such sharing and comparison was attempted by several of the casualty recorders who were surveyed. One recorder mentioned that they used standardised definitions and categories based on International Humanitarian Law in order to be able to successfully combine information with others about all the casualties across a region.

“We will actually put our data in connection with the data of other organisations and institutions. And in our case it’s really essential to connect it...We stick to Geneva Conventions and International Humanitarian Law because we find that international standards are useful and it’s essential to respect them, and we also want to make sure that actually what we do can be connected [with] our colleagues in other [countries].”

These issues also apply to the use of casualty recorders’ work by others, as the recorder quoted above mentions. If definitions and categories are consistent and openly available to others, information can be more easily assessed and used. A minority of recorders will need to consider whether and how it is safe to share this information. Those working in some repressive environments would not publish definitions and categories if exposure as a casualty recorder would be dangerous, or if sharing knowledge of their methodologies could endanger sources, for example. However, sharing definitions and categories with others who used these recorders’ casualty information could still be mutually beneficial.

1.3.3 For Credibility, and for Others to Understand a Recorder’s Work

Definitions and categorisations have political significance. In some places, recorders reported that the question of which areas of a country were experiencing an armed conflict, or whether the country was in conflict at all, were highly contentious issues. These issues affect the question of who should be defined as a conflict victim. Many recorders reported that combat status categories were very politicised where they worked. Conflict parties, the government, and different communities had various perceptions of who was or what constituted a civilian. These different interpretations came from different, politically based interpretations of the situation.

All the criteria that recorders can use and the categorisations that they make will have their imperfections and difficulties. However, openly describing definitions and categorisations (as long as it is safe to do so), for example through publishing internal codebooks on the recorder’s website, was reported to be important for credibility with others. Transparency about how a recorder produced their information and what it was based on helped audiences and others comprehend the work. It allowed them to understand how a recorder’s findings should be seen, including the limitations of a recorder’s work. Openness about definitions and categories was also reported to be important for demonstrating objectivity or lack of political bias in the production of information.

Transparency and openness were key general principles for many recorders. For some, transparency was considered crucial from an academic or scientific perspective. Recorders reported that transparency and openness were important for the acceptance of their work by others, and in order to limit or prevent criticism from those who might be hostile to or attack their recording work politically. At a more basic level, being open about definitions and categorisations means that others can understand what a recorder is recording, and what their records mean.

In summary, definitions and categorisations are an important issue in casualty recording practice because:

- Categorising information is a basic part of recording, and recorders’ procedures
- Definitions are necessary for consistency and reliability in information
- How definitions and categories are applied will affect the strength of recorders’ information
- Definitions and categories are important for how others see and understand recorders’ work, and how others use it
2. TWO KEY ISSUES IN DEFINITION AND CATEGORISATION

This section looks at how casualty recorders using various sources of information in different circumstances approached two key issues in definition and categorisation, and what affected their choices. The two issues are:

- The victims that recorders included in their records (which we will refer to as inclusion criteria)
- How recorders described status categories (whether victims were civilian or not)

Whilst there are other definition and categorisation issues that cause casualty recorders dilemmas, these two are discussed because they can be particularly challenging. Discussion of these issues can also illustrate general points about useful practice in developing and using definitions and categories. The survey on which this paper is based also asked casualty recorders specifically about their treatment of these two issues, which were identified during the development of the research as particularly important to recorders. (For a full list of the questions, see ‘Appendix on Survey Methodology’.)

The purpose of this section (section 2) is to reflect on practice as shown in this survey, which may help current or would-be recorders reflect on their work and on the field. This section also gives the background for the section that follows (section 3), on constructing definitions and categories.

2.1 INCLUSION CRITERIA

Two things determined the victims that recorders included in their casualty records:
- The nature of the violence that they were recording the consequences of, and for most recorders, what they considered a conflict death to be
- What deaths (if any) they excluded from these records

As with all categories that casualty recorders used, there were generally two stages to including or excluding cases:
- Defining or setting criteria, and
- Making decisions about particular incidents or individuals

The discussion in this section is organised accordingly. All the examples given are taken from the work of recorders interviewed for this study.

As mentioned above regarding definitions and categorisations in general, inclusion criteria are important to:
- The staff, volunteers or workers on casualty recording projects, in order for them to produce consistent records
- Casualty recorders’ audiences and those who used the information produced, so that they knew what records refer to, and what any numbers about casualties meant

2.1.1 Approaches to Defining and Setting Inclusion Criteria

2.1.1.1 The Violence that Recorders Documented

The casualty recorders interviewed for this study all documented deaths from conflict as part or all of their recording work. There was a range of practice in how recorders defined conflict deaths, but also in whether they found it necessary to do so for their work.

Some recorders did not limit their records to conflict deaths. For example, some recorded the casualties of all forms of armed violence in the country of conflict, or were concerned with the affects of certain weapons in both conflict and non-conflict settings. The inclusion criteria or case definitions of these recorders reflected these broader concerns.

For some other recorders, defining a conflict death was not necessarily relevant because, for example, they limited their records within conflict to: certain types of attacks such as suicide bombings; certain types of...
victims such as those who went missing during the period of conflict; cases that were violations of International Humanitarian Law; or cases that met other criteria set by other institutions (see section 2.1.1.2 p8). These recorders had specific inclusion criteria reflecting these limits.

Some recorders chose not to engage with whether deaths were related to ‘conflict’, using terms such as ‘political violence’ or ‘ethnic violence’ instead. This was either because it was controversial as to whether there was a conflict in the country, or because the recorder felt that ‘conflict’ was a legal category that they were not qualified to use.

Casualty recorders did not necessarily keep written definitions or inclusion criteria. Where they did not, they relied on understanding built up among those working on the project either as a result of formal training or learning on the job and through discussion. Those who did keep written guidelines also used these processes of training and discussion, and some reported that their guidelines were updated with the results of these discussions of difficult or ambiguous cases, or other developments.

### 2.1.1.2 Exclusions of Certain Casualties Made by Recorders

As mentioned in section 2.1.4 of ‘An Overview of the Field’\(^8\), just under half of the recorders surveyed sought to record every casualty of the conflict(s) they were focusing on. The others restricted their records to include only:

- The deaths of civilians (or protected persons as covered by International Humanitarian Law);
- Victims who were missing, or buried in mass or clandestine graves;
- Casualties caused by one conflict party;
- Casualties caused by certain types of weapons;
- Casualties whose deaths could be considered violations of law;
- Casualties recorded in the course of the organisation’s main work (e.g. providing medical services).

A third of these organisations restricted whom they recorded by applying more than one of the above criteria. The reasons why recorders restricted who they recorded related either to their objectives in recording/the type of work that they did (e.g. with unknown victim identification work), or their access to information. Those who documented violence committed by only one conflict party did so to draw attention to that party’s conduct. Similarly, recorders who documented casualties caused by certain weapons or types of attacks only were seeking to draw attention to the effects of these particular types of violence.

Most of those who only recorded the deaths of civilians or protected persons were concerned with highlighting the conflict’s affects on civilians for purposes of advocacy, or were concerned with ensuring the protection of civilians in armed conflict. However, some reported that the difficulty of getting information on combatant casualties from conflict parties dictated this restriction.

Some of those who tried to record every casualty reported specific reasons for doing so. The equality of all human life was an important principle to several recorders, which meant that it was important to them to record everyone. For some it was important to record all deaths in order to avoid any accusations of bias.

Others found that it was useful to document all deaths in order to categorise these more accurately. One example given was about determining whether civilians were killed: nuances that might reveal that casualties referred to as combatants could in fact be civilians may be missed if all source material mentioning combatants was initially excluded. Also, where a recorder continues to update and clarify their records post conflict, categorisations will often need to be revisited as new information emerges and secrecy diminishes.

It will not be the case in all scenarios that a recorder will need to record every casualty in order to generate a comprehensive picture of the deaths that they are most concerned with.

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\(^8\) For other papers in the collection see [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection)
Identifying casualties caused by certain types of weapons can be straightforward, for example. However, where there are many ambiguous cases at the limits of a recorder’s inclusion criteria, recording comprehensively and then categorising will be good practice.

2.1.1.3 The Range of Inclusion Criteria – from Broadly to Strictly Defined

The following is a basic breakdown of how recorders treated inclusion criteria. The degree of precision that recorders used or felt was necessary varied:

- Some recorders stated that they did not find strict definitions or inclusion criteria necessary: the relevant violent deaths were clearly identifiable to them by the targets, perpetrators, or types of attack mentioned in their source material;
- For identifying the fate of the missing, some found that it was necessary for the criteria to be broad, investigating all missing people in a given time period;
- Some aimed to record all deaths they saw as related to the conflict, not just those from conflict violence. These recorders had various interpretations of what should be considered conflict-related;
- Some stated that they recorded direct deaths from conflict only, or violent deaths that resulted from injuries sustained from deliberate acts of conflict violence (or, for those who did not use the term conflict or recorded more broadly, from the types of armed violence that they recorded);
- Some had a range of set categories in their database or data storage system, which covered different violent actions or deaths. Only deaths that fitted into these categories would be recorded. The recording was therefore led by these categories. For some these categories covered violations of the law. For others they might refer to the weapons used or type of attack;
- Some recorders, as part or all of their work, dealt with cases that they were instructed by others to investigate. Or, where their organisation had a core purpose that was not recording e.g. providing medical services, the recorder documented only the cases that they dealt with in the course of this work.

2.1.1.4 Defining Direct and Indirect Conflict Deaths

Where recorders documented deaths from all types of conflict violence in the country of conflict (without, for example, restrictions by weapon type), most limited their records to what some referred to specifically as ‘direct deaths’ from conflict violence. That is, deaths that resulted directly from the violent actions of participants to the conflict, during conflict activities.

These were contrasted with indirect deaths, which were not the direct result of a deliberate act of armed violence that may or may not have been directed at the victim, but can be linked to the conflict. Such deaths might happen as a consequence of conflict (e.g. a person dies because they had a life-threatening illness but could not reach a hospital because of hostilities), or where death was a result of the conduct or effects of conflict (e.g. a person dies in a road accident with a military vehicle). Some recorders documented indirect deaths separately in their information system. Sometimes recorders documented certain types of indirect deaths that were particularly controversial and politically important in the country of conflict, even if no other indirect deaths were recorded.

The direct/indirect distinction can be useful to casualty recorders in order to keep their records of conflict deaths as closely related as possible to the immediate consequences of conflict violence, where this is their goal. It can also help clarify terms such as ‘victims of war’.

However, stating that records refer only to direct deaths from conflict will not resolve all ambiguities around inclusion criteria. Recorders resolved such ambiguities in different ways. For example, there are different answers to the question of whether those killed by a collapsing building that was hit by a bomb are direct conflict deaths; similarly, people killed in a road accident with a military vehicle where the accident was a result of that vehicle being attacked; or, a death from a heart attack said to be triggered by the emotional shock of a bomb hitting a building. All of these deaths result from the use of weapons by conflict parties, but not from injuries directly inflicted by those weapons. There was not consensus among recorders on such questions. Because of this, we believe it is important for the sake of the audiences of casualty recorders for recorders to describe their inclusion criteria in detail and to share these (as long as it is safe to do so).

For the recorders who found the concept of ‘direct conflict deaths’ relevant, how to define these may be for casualty recording practitioners to pursue as part of discussions of professional standards and information...
standardisation in casualty recording. A key question, raised by the work of recorders, is whether this concept should refer to:

1. Only violent deaths from injuries inflicted directly by weapons used during acts of conflict violence, or
2. A broader range of deaths resulting from acts of conflict violence, as raised by the dilemmas described above. A way of expressing this is “death as a result of conflict violence”

A small number of recorders in one country of conflict sought to record all deaths that they considered conflict related, including direct and indirect deaths. This was feasible and relevant because the number of indirect deaths in the country of conflict was relatively small, as was the number of overall deaths. Contentious issues such as the extent to which impaired health infrastructure caused deaths were also not present.

Deciding whether a death was sufficiently related to the conflict to include posed dilemmas for these recorders. Again there were no definitive answers, and different recorders came to a variety of conclusions on questions such as: whether military personnel who died accidentally in military vehicles but not whilst engaged in any conflict-related activities should be included; whether military personnel who committed suicide whilst deployed, or politically motivated suicides, should be considered conflict related deaths. Decisions generally depended on an assessment of the motivations of those involved in these deaths, and whether these could be said to be conflict related. Motivations were not straightforward to assess, information was often not available and interpretations differed, resulting in different recorders coming to a range of conclusions on the same cases.

2.1.1.5 Defining the Acts of Violence that Were Considered Part of the Conflict

Recorders who documented deaths from all types of conflict violence often identified which cases to include by looking at the details of an incident and assessing whether the incident should therefore be considered part of the conflict. Among other things, recorders looked at the perpetrator group, the perpetrator’s motivation, the target of the violence, or the type of violence. For example, a suicide bombing might always be assumed to be conflict related, whereas all shootings could not be; the deaths of people found violently killed might be assumed related to the conflict. In many countries of conflict, defining which violence was conflict related was not straightforward for recorders, and recorders came to a variety of conclusions.

In several countries of conflict, conflict parties were also involved in criminal activities that sometimes caused deaths, for example robberies, kidnappings for extortion, or trade in narcotics. Some recorders included these deaths in their records, where the perpetrators were committing criminal activity and associated violence in order to finance or otherwise support their conflict activities. These criminal activities did not directly further military goals, nor were they political violence; however, they were committed in order to advance the conflict objectives of the perpetrators. Therefore, these recorders considered these activities to be part of the conflict violence. Others considered deaths from these activities to be indirect deaths from conflict or not part of the conflict violence. At least one recorder included violent deaths from crimes such as robberies that could not be linked to any conflict party. The assessment here was that these were deaths that arose from the conflict, as it was only possible to commit these crimes because of the breakdown in security that the conflict caused, and so these deaths should be included in the record of violent deaths from conflict.

Assessments such as those described above can be controversial, especially within the countries of conflict. Openness about inclusion criteria and the reasoning behind these criteria, again, could be an important way for recorders to confront this controversy (as long as it is safe to do so).

Disaggregating deaths into different categories that separate out controversial or ambiguous types of violence such as those described above could also help recorders and the users of their data. Recorders could apply a direct/indirect death distinction, disaggregate different kinds of violence or deaths into different lists, or give audiences or users of information the option of this...
disaggregation. Such an option would mean that, for example, criminal violence committed by conflict parties to further their conflict objectives could be included in the main figures or records produced by the recorder (but categorised as such), or separated.

One casualty recorder described separating their casualty records into separate lists on their website for the purpose of addressing controversy around whether different types of deaths should be considered conflict related. The recorder reported that this was helpful to others’ perceptions of their objectivity and reliability.

As described in section 2.1.1.2 above (p8), recording more broadly than the casualties that a recorder is most concerned with can help some recorders to record these more accurately. In order to accurately determine the number of victims of an armed conflict, in some contexts where the boundaries are more blurred it could be necessary to record victims of all armed violence, or for conflict casualty recorders to use the records of others regarding e.g. criminal violence to assist their work and to explain ambiguities to audiences. One recorder reported that they recorded not only victims of conflict violence but people who died from various other incidents and causes, in order that the total number of these types of victim could not be integrated into and used to manipulate numbers relating to direct conflict deaths.

2.1.1.6 Inclusion Criteria Developed from External Sources Including International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

Recorders often used terms or categories developed by others as a reference for developing their inclusion criteria. Some recorders used these external sources more than others. The full range of external sources casualty recorders reported using in developing definitions and categories is summarised in section 3.2 below (p31).

Some casualty recorders, as mentioned above, recorded deaths, which according to their analysis, could be violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). These recorders developed categories to record different violations. Such categories included, for example, ‘wilful killing of protected person(s)’, and ‘civilian death(s) as a consequence of an indiscriminate attack’. Some only recorded violations of IHL and human rights laws, including for example ‘extrajudicial killings’, in their work. Recorders reported that they did not see their work as making legal determinations by using these categories – such determinations were for courts to make. Some used these categories to provide indications or an assessment of the situation according to recognised categories. Many contributed their work to legal processes, so therefore used terms that were relevant to these processes. Some also reported using legal judgments to categorise or re-categorise incidents or deaths according to the judgment on violations of the law that local or international courts had made on the case.

For many recorders, as suggested previously, there was controversy in the country of conflict as to whether IHL, which is the law of armed conflict, applied – that is, whether all or part of the violence occurring in the country was considered to amount to armed conflict. This would affect whether audiences and others would accept categories developed according to IHL as valid in the work of recorders. A small number of recorders reported that they had access to the opinions of legal experts, either within their organisations or through partners. Such expertise could be highly useful to those seeking to usefully and accurately develop and use categories according to IHL, and other bodies of law.

Unless a recorder was only recording violations, using IHL would not resolve dilemmas in the inclusion or exclusion of cases, such as which deaths should be considered conflict related or not: IHL does not define conflict deaths.

Several recorders reported that they tried to use the principles, language or frameworks of IHL where they could in the development of their inclusion criteria and other definitions. Across the range of recording
described in section 2 of ‘An Overview of the Field’ and the approaches discussed in section 2.3 of that paper, recorders found IHL important.

For those using the approaches referred to in the Overview as ‘Recording using an on-the-ground network’, ‘Multiple source investigation’, and ‘Unknown victim identification’, this concern for IHL was often because their records were, or the recorder intended them to be, used in legal processes. This did not mean that those recorders made legal analyses themselves. As mentioned above, categorisations made according to violations can be illustrative, and courts make their own decisions. Recorders working on more long term or historical records integrated the judgments of courts back into their casualty records to make these categorisations.

Recorders using the ‘Document-based recording’ or ‘Document-based recording with on-the-ground corroboration’ approaches were also concerned with IHL in their inclusion criteria. They were concerned with IHL more broadly either on principle, because they felt using IHL as far as possible in categories helped them set or uphold certain standards, or because they believed that their records might indicate that violations could be taking place which others should investigate. Some of the recorders using these approaches noted that the source material they used would not necessarily support legal analyses, but could give contextual information or indications of situations that should be investigated.

Apart from IHL, recorders reported using a number of other sources to guide their inclusion criteria. For example:

- Categorisations of the types of violence developed by truth commissions or similar bodies in the country of conflict;
- Categorisations of violations used for the purpose of monitoring civilian protection by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (which were confidential);
- UN Security Council Resolutions that call for the consequences of violence to be monitored, for example Resolution 1612 on Children in Armed Conflict to highlight the need to monitor the killing of children in armed conflict as a specific group;
- The definitions of explosive remnants of war used by the Landmine and Cluster Munitions Monitor for casualties caused by those weapons;
- The Declaration on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance for categorising victims of enforced disappearances who were later identified as killed.

2.1.2 Decision Making: Applying Inclusion Criteria

Determining if a death should be in their records was generally straightforward for casualty recorders once inclusion criteria were set (which was not necessarily a straightforward process). The problems faced were in a minority of cases when information was ambiguous, incomplete or contradictory, so it was hard to assess whether a case was relevant or not. Recorders dealt with such issues according to the general confirmation procedures that they applied to handling information in all decisions, as described throughout ‘Evaluating Sources’.

Several mentioned that the key factors in the decision of whether to include an ambiguous case were specific aspects of the context and details of the incident or circumstances of a person’s death. This could include the type of attack or violence that was used, details about weapons, or details about uniforms of those involved. Where there was not explicit information on perpetrators, intended targets or motives, such details might identify an incident with a particular conflict party and thus that it should be included.

As with many of the grey areas in casualty recording, such approaches do not always provide a solution. The way particular conflict parties operated was reported in some countries of conflict to be impersonated by ordinary criminals in order to cover their crimes. Alternatively, what were in fact conflict incidents were sometimes discounted by sources as common crimes. Deep knowledge of the country of conflict and the dynamics of the conflict are clearly necessary in order for recorders to make good judgments, especially in ambiguous cases.

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9 For other papers in the collection see www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection

10 For other papers in the collection see www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection
Uncertain cases were dealt with by:

- Retaining the sources and details in a recorder’s system, for further investigation when new information became available (we consider it a good practice in casualty recording to update records and revisit incomplete evidence – see section 3.2 of ‘An Overview of the Field’ and sections 2.4.4 and 3.2 of ‘Evaluating Sources’);
- Listing uncertain cases separately in public records, or using tools such as verification scales or notes to identify difficulties with the case. The principle here is that others (audiences, users of data) can make up their mind about what the information represents;
- Simply excluding these cases from the records.

2.2 STATUS CATEGORIES

The status of victims – whether they were civilian or not – was a particularly important categorisation for casualty recorders. 37 out of the 40 organisations surveyed either collected information about whether victims were considered civilian, or made a decision on this question. There was however a wide range of approaches, purposes, categories and definitions applied by casualty recorders to the question of what we are generally terming “status categories”. This will be explored below.

The status of those who die in conflicts has political and legal significance: this is at the heart of its importance to recorders, and the contentiousness of status categorisation. Several recorders reported that the public opposition that they had to their work was generally not over what they said about the total numbers killed, but about how many of those were civilian.

**Recorders Who Did Not Use Status Categories**

For those who did not concern themselves at all with status categories, the reasons were as follows:

- Two recorders emphasised the need to account for all victims equally on principle, and so did not make differentiations between civilians and others for this reason;
- One provided evidence that would help answer the question of combat status to courts that requested this. These courts could make these designations, and therefore determine whether crimes had been committed: the recorder did not see this as their job;
- One recorder did not have the means or the source material to investigate how victims should be categorised by status. Also, there was political controversy in the country of conflict over whether the violence documented was armed conflict or not. The recorder did not wish to enter in to this controversy by assigning combat status categories.

2.2.1 What Were Casualty Recorders Trying to Capture With Their Use of Status Categories?

What casualty recorders were trying to achieve by using status categories varied. Some were trying to make definitive judgments about the status of victims, either to indicate possible violations of the law or in order more generally to show the nature of the conflict. Others used information on status in the course of their investigations into the fate of individual victims.

The way in which recorders who used status categories defined and categorised these also differed. Some tried to stick closely to definitions and categorisations found in IHL, whereas others developed categories themselves that were specific to the local situation and the armed groups operating in the country of conflict.

The level to which recorders wanted or felt they were able to confirm status categorisations varied as well. Different possibilities for confirmation affected how recorders chose to define and approach status categorisations. The types of sources and investigative possibilities available to recorders affected, for example, whether they made qualifications on the categorisations they made. Some recorders emphasised that the casualties they categorised as civilians were ‘reported’ civilian casualties, to highlight the standard of proof that the categorisation carried.
2.2.1.1 Status as a Contextualising Detail in the Course of Investigations

For some recorders who used an ‘Unknown victim identification’ approach (see section 2.3 of ‘An Overview of the Field’ for the model of five approaches to casualty recording11), information about whether a victim was considered to be a civilian, a combatant or a member of an armed group was collected not in order to make a definitive judgement on that victim’s status. It was used as one detail collected during the investigation process, which helped build up a picture about a victim and the circumstances of their going missing. The purpose of building this picture was to assist the search for the victim and the determination of their eventual fate, by giving ‘leads’ to the recorder.

Status information under these circumstances was not necessarily collected according to particular categories, and was a record of what sources or witnesses said about the victim. Since the recorder used this information internally to help build up a picture of a victim, definitively confirming statements about civilian status was not necessarily a priority to these recorders, whose goal was victim identification.

2.2.1.2 Recording Status: Combat Status or Armed Group Membership

All other casualty recorders collected status information either to exclude casualties from their records (if they only documented civilian deaths), or to assess and document status and use this category in published numbers, records or analysis. Status was a key detail for those recorders who sought to contribute their records to legal processes – the killing of civilians can indicate crimes in some circumstances. Recorders that did legal casework also used information on the status of victims to decide whether to pursue individual cases with families.

In the work of the casualty recorders in this survey, when documenting status there was a distinction between:

1. Recording combat status. That is, whether the victim was seen by the recorder to be taking part in the conflict at the time of their death.
   - Some of those who recorded combat status used categories and definitions found in IHL. They looked, for example, at which people or groups are considered protected under the law from attack during conflict, and at the concept of ‘direct participation in hostilities’.
   - Others developed their own definitions of who they considered to be a civilian or a combatant at the time of their death. These definitions were not necessarily completely consistent with IHL.
   - Some recorders did not have enough detail in the sources available to them, or an on-the-ground investigating presence, to be able to make a detailed investigation and evaluation of the combat status of a victim based on information about the victims and the circumstances of their death. In this case, assigning combat status would be based mainly on reproducing what sources stated or reported, following the evaluation and crosschecking of sources according to a recorder’s procedures of confirmation (for a full discussion of how recorders evaluated their sources, see the paper ‘Evaluating Sources’12).
   - The categories that recorders used to document combat status included civilian, non-combatant, protected person, combatant.

2. Recording membership or suspected membership of different armed groups or forces.
   - Recorders who documented status in this way made the distinction between civilians and members or suspected members of armed groups. These armed groups were not necessarily individually named in the categories used by recorders. Recorders sometimes categorised instead by the general terms used in the country of conflict to indicate affiliation with armed groups (e.g. ‘terrorist’, ‘militant’, ‘security forces’).
   - Recording membership of these armed groups might imply combat status or participation in the conflict. However, it was not necessarily a judgment on this. Some recorders were very clear that armed group membership should not be taken as representing combat status: there

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11 For other papers in the collection see www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection

12 For other papers in the collection see www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection
might not be the information to determine if a victim had a combat role within an armed group, or there might be controversy between different actors over whether the armed group should be considered to have been part of the conflict at the time of the victim’s death.

- Some of those who recorded status by armed group membership did not categorise by combat status because they saw this as a legal categorisation that they did not have the expertise or enough information to decide.
- As with combat status, some recorders did not have enough detail from the sources available to them, or an on-the-ground investigating presence, to be able to make a detailed investigation and evaluation of the armed group a victim belonged to. In this case, categorisation was based mainly on reproducing what sources stated or reported, following the evaluation and crosschecking of sourced according to the recorder’s procedures (for a full discussion of how recorders evaluated their sources, see the paper ‘Evaluating sources’).

Some recorders documented both combat status and any membership of armed groups/armed forces for each victim, in order to give a fuller picture of the circumstances of a victim’s death. Recording both sets of details would show, for example, when soldiers were killed after capture.

The categories of group membership that recorders used were not necessarily limited to armed groups. Other categories of group membership were used, for example to record the victimisation of members of certain political organisations or particularly vulnerable parts of the population (where this was not covered by other pieces of information such as victims’ professions or ethnicity).

2.2.2 Developing and Using Status Categories

This section concentrates on how recorders decided and recorded the status of victims. The discussion looks at:

- How combat status and armed group membership categories were developed by recorders;
- The advantages and disadvantages of these different ways of recording status;
- The circumstances under which these different divisions were used. This is set out according to the five approaches to casualty recording identified in section 2.3 of ‘An Overview of the Field’\(^\text{13}\).

The division into five approaches is based on the types of sources a recorder uses and the way they confirm information about casualties.

2.2.2.1 Developing Definitions and Categories Based on Combat Status

As mentioned above in section 2.2.1, there were two approaches taken by recorders to categorising by combat status: using categories that are found in IHL, and developing their own combat status definitions and categories.

Using IHL for Combat Status Definitions

The difference between civilians and combatants is found in IHL. There is a difference within the law between combatant status, which only exists in international armed conflict for the armed forces of states and has implications for giving prisoner of war status for example, and the generic use of ‘combatant’ to describe those who are not protected against attack under IHL, according to the principle of distinction between civilians and combatants. This can be expressed as a distinction between those who are directly participating in hostilities, and those who are not. Civilians who participate in the conflict lose protection for the duration of their participation; those who were participating in hostilities but are captured, rendered defenceless or surrender (considered ‘hors de combat’) gain protection.

For definitions from IHL of what we will refer to generically as:

- Civilians (those who are protected from being attacked, did not directly participate in hostilities/are non-combatant, are hors de combat) and
- Combatants (those who are not protected from being attacked, participated directly in hostilities)

\(^{13}\) For other papers in the collection see www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection
Recorders used the following sources:

- The *Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols*
- The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)’s *study of Customary International Humanitarian Law*
- The ICRC’s *Interpretive Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities under International Humanitarian Law*

Some reported that they gave training to their staff in IHL, or had legal experts within their organisation or as close partners who could help give clarification on terms and help with categorisation. A small number of recorders reported that they used definitions of civilian and combatant found in their country's national law, which were the same as those found in IHL.

The guidance found in the sources listed above is summarised here (though this should not be seen a comprehensive overview):\(^{14}\)

**Rule 1 of the ICRC’s Customary IHL study** describes the principle of distinction between civilians and combatants – with ‘combatant’ referring to those who are not protected against attack (as described briefly above). This applies during both international and non-international armed conflicts.

**Civilians, or those protected from attack**

**Rule 5 of the ICRC’s Customary IHL study** discusses the definition of civilians, who could be defined either as those who do not take a direct part in hostilities, or who are not members of armed forces as defined in the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols. There is ambiguity over whether members of armed opposition groups in non-international armed conflicts are considered members of armed forces or civilians. These individuals will lose protection from attack (and can be considered combatant in that sense), but may be tried as civilians for their participation in violence under national law.

Specifically protected groups or people were found in the Customary IHL study by recorders under: **Rule 25 Medical Personnel, Rule 27 Religious Personnel, Rule 30 Persons and Objects Displaying the Distinctive Emblem, Rule 31 Humanitarian Relief Personnel, Rule 33 Personnel and Objects Involved in a Peacekeeping Mission, Rule 34 Journalists, Rule 47 Attacks against Persons Hors de Combat**

**Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977** (note that this refers to International Armed Conflicts) gives the following guidance:

- **Article 50 of Additional Protocol I** defines civilians as those who do not belong to any of the organised armed forces of any state/government Party to the conflict (as per **Article 43**), or to any organised resistance movements. It also excludes from the category of civilians those who take up arms to spontaneously resist invasion, and the armed forces of governments or authorities which do not have to be recognised by other Parties (as defined in **Article 4 (1), (2), (3) and (6) of the Third Geneva Convention**)
- **Article 50** also states “In case of doubt whether a person is a civilian, that person shall be considered to be a civilian.” This is stated in the context of the action that conflict parties should take in order to protect civilians against the effects of hostilities. However, a number of casualty recorders reported that they used this principle in their decision making on combat status, and felt this was supported by IHL.
- **Article 41** states that those who are ‘hors de combat’ are protected from attack. “A person is ‘hors de combat’ if: (a) he is in the power of an adverse Party; (b) he clearly expresses an intention to surrender; or (c) he has been rendered unconscious or is otherwise incapacitated by wounds or sickness, and therefore is incapable of defending himself”.
- **Article 43** states that medical and religious personnel of armed forces are non-combatants.

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\(^{14}\) The guidance given here comes partly from information given by recorders during interview, or in written materials (e.g. codebooks) that they shared with us. This information is supplemented by analysis provided by the Every Casualty programme’s Legal Consultant and Researcher, Rachel Joyce, in order to give a more detailed summary of the relevant content in the IHL sources that recorders told us they used to define combat status. ORG takes full responsibility for the guidance given here, which is accurate to the best of our knowledge.
Article 51 of Additional Protocol I, covering international armed conflicts, states that civilians are protected as long as they do not directly participate in hostilities.

Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. Geneva, 12 August 1949 (again refers to International Armed Conflict) gives the following guidance:

- **Article 4** defines protected persons as “those who, at a given moment and in any manner whatsoever, find themselves, in case of a conflict or occupation, in the hands of a Party to the conflict or Occupying Power of which they are not nationals”.

Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), 8 June 1977 (refers to Non-International Armed Conflict) gives the following guidance:

- Additional Protocol II states that Common Article 3, which in non-international armed conflict gives a minimum level of protection including a prohibition of “violence to life” to those who have “no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed ‘hors de combat’”, applies even where a state does not acknowledge an internal state of war.
- **Article 4** states that all those “who do not take a direct part or who have ceased to take part in hostilities” benefit from these fundamental guarantees as stated in Common Article 3 and **Article 75 of Additional Protocol I**.
- **Article 13** states that civilians and the civilian population must not be the object of attacks as long as they do not take a direct part in hostilities.

Combatants, or those not protected from attack

Rule 3 of the ICRC’s Customary IHL study discusses the definition of combatant, drawing a distinction between those who have combatant status in International Armed Conflict, and those who are not protected from attack according to the principle of distinction, or due to their direct participation in hostilities, in both International and Non-International Armed Conflict.

Members of armed forces in International Armed Conflicts are defined in the Third Geneva Convention, Additional Protocol I and Additional Protocol III as having the following characteristics. They must:

- Be organised
- Be under a command structure responsible for their conduct
- Be subject to a disciplinary system, which enforces compliance with the rules of international law
- Distinguish themselves from the civilian population by uniforms and distinctive signs visible from a distance. In exceptional circumstances the minimum requirement is to carry arms openly

Armed forces are described in Article 43 of Additional Protocol I and Article 4 of the Third Geneva Convention. Members of armed forces are combatants.

Article 50 of Additional Protocol I (referring to International Armed Conflict) defines civilians as those who do not belong to any of the organised armed forces of any state/government Party to the conflict (as per Article 43), or to any organised resistance movements. It also excludes from the category of civilians those who take up arms to spontaneously resist invasion, and the armed forces of governments or authorities, who do not have to be recognised by other Parties (as defined in Article 4 (1), (2), (3) and (6) of the Third Geneva Convention). These groups which civilians are defined against should be considered combatant (in the generic sense). Article 1 of Additional Protocol II describes non-international armed conflicts as taking place between a state and “dissident armed forces or other organized armed groups” under a responsible command.

Article 51 of Additional Protocol I, covering international armed conflicts, states that civilians are protected as long as they do not directly participate in hostilities. Article 13 of Additional Protocol II, covering non-international armed conflicts, also states that civilians are protected as long as they do not directly participate in hostilities.

Direct Participation in Hostilities

From looking at the treaty and customary rules discussed briefly here, casualty recorders will face two main dilemmas in using IHL for definitions of civilian and combatant, even if IHL should be considered the ultimate source on these questions:
• Most recorders were recording casualties in non-international armed conflicts, whereas most treaty rules cover international armed conflicts, and there is ambiguity around how armed opposition groups should be classified.

• If the key detail for recorders in order to assign civilian or combatant status, according to the principle of distinction between civilians and combatants in any conflict, is the question of who is protected from attack, the definition of “direct participation in hostilities” is crucial. Rule 6 of the ICRC’s Customary IHL study observes that there is no precise definition of “direct participation in hostilities” that has been collectively adopted by states.

The final piece of guidance on the distinction between civilians and combatants in IHL was found by recorders in the ICRC’s Interpretive Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities under International Humanitarian Law, key points of which are summarised in an FAQ from the ICRC:

• In drawing a distinction between direct and indirect participation in hostilities, this states that “Persons participate directly in hostilities when they carry out acts, which aim to support one party to the conflict by directly causing harm to another party, either directly inflicting death, injury or destruction, or by directly harming the enemy's military operations or capacity... 'Indirect' participation in hostilities contributes to the general war effort of a party, but does not directly cause harm and, therefore, does not lead to a loss of protection against direct attack. This would include, for example, the production and shipment of weapons, the construction of roads and other infrastructure, and financial, administrative and political support.”

• The Guidance introduces the concept of ‘continuous combat function’. This refers to a person taking on a role for an organised armed group in a non-international armed conflict to directly participate in hostilities. That is, their participation is not limited to one particular act (during which civilians who participate would lose their protection), but is more similar to being a member, for example, of a national army, who may be the object of an attack at any time during conflict, even when they are not engaged in combat. As summarised in the FAQ: “While members of organized armed groups belonging to a party to the conflict lose protection against direct attack for the duration of their membership (i.e., for as long as they assume a continuous combat function), civilians lose protection against direct attack for the duration of each specific act amounting to direct participation in hostilities. This includes any preparations and geographical deployments or withdrawals constituting an integral part of a specific hostile act.”

Recorders who used categories and definitions found in IHL for their combat status categories emphasised that the categorisations they made did not prove or determine anything legally, and that they were not lawyers but were simply using the law as the most authoritative source on defining combat status. Many recorders who used IHL for combat status definitions did however have relationships with courts or aimed for their casualty records to be used in legal proceedings.

At least one recorder surveyed was of the opinion that it might be dangerous for casualty recorders to try to use IHL or other bodies of law in their work, and that this might damage rather than enhance the credibility of their records, as recorders did not have legal expertise. This is a question for practitioners to discuss in the context of considering professional standards or the standardisation of the field.

From the discussion above it is clear that decisions on combat status according to the definitions found in IHL will sometimes require a considerable amount of information about both an individual and the circumstances of their death. Some recorders who had access to a smaller range of sources therefore had reservations about using these definitions. However, though recorders who used a greater range of sources or had a larger on-the-ground presence were more likely to use IHL-based categorisations on combat status, others also used these categorisations in their work, as discussed in section 2.2.2 below (p14).

Recorders reported that an advantage of using status definitions and categories from IHL was that, despite the law being subject to different interpretations and ambiguities, it was an authoritative, universal source to adhere to. This assisted both with making a recorder’s casualty records comparable with other sources, and with helping these records be widely understood.
Recorders Who Developed Their Own Combat Status Definitions

As mentioned above in section 2.2.1, some casualty recorders developed their own definitions of who they considered to be civilian and combatant. Most of these recorders stated that they felt their definitions probably conformed to IHL, or were inspired by what they knew of its principles, but were not specifically based on it. Some who stated this made decisions that might not be supported by the rules discussed above. For example:

- One recorder considered members of the national armed forces who were off-duty to be civilian;
- Another considered members of armed groups who were not taking part in combat at the time of their death but were going about their normal civilian life to be civilian. If the concept of a ‘continuous combat function’ is valid these individuals should be considered combatant. This is a noted ambiguity in non-international armed conflicts;
- Another considered that foreign civilian contractors who did not have a combat function should not be considered civilian, because they put themselves in danger for the sake of making money.

Recorders who developed their own combat status definitions generally considered a combination of what the victim was doing at the moment of their death, and their membership of any armed group or armed forces. Different recorders gave different weight to these components. For one recorder, all those who were not in combat at the time of their death were considered civilian. Others considered membership of national armed forces but not other armed groups to be significant.

Recorders sometimes developed their own definitions because they felt this was necessary in order for their records to be relevant to the situation and people in the country of conflict. Alternatively, recorders used their own combat status definitions because they thought that the source information they had was not of a good enough quality enough to justify using definitions from IHL. For others, as mentioned above in section 2.2.1.2 (p14), assigning combat status was based on what sources specifically stated or reported, using the sources’ terms (after evaluation and crosschecking of sources according to the recorder’s procedures of confirmation).

One recorder reported that their definitions of combat status were developed as a result of their knowledge of the limitations of the source material. A good level of detail was not often available in the reports they used as their source. Broadness of definition was therefore needed if the data the recorder produced was going to be useable. The global focus of the recorder’s work also determined how they developed their status categorisation: local armed group-based categories were not applicable. All armed actors, or those reported as suspected of armed activity, were placed in the non-civilian category. Those who were reported as civilians, or whose status was not given and were not reported as being associated with any armed actors, were recorded as civilians.

An advantage to recorders of developing their own combat status definitions was that they could adjust how specific these definitions were to the information they had access to and the level of confirmation they could achieve, as described in the example above. On the other hand, where recorders used categories such as ‘civilian’ and ‘combatant’ (which are also legal terms), arriving at their own definitions of these terms, comparison to other sources could be more difficult. If a recorder does not specify their definitions publicly, their categorisations of ‘civilian’ and ‘combatant’ also risk being misunderstood.

2.2.2.2 Developing Definitions and Categories Based on Armed Group Membership

Those who recorded status this way drew a distinction between either:

- Civilians, and members or alleged/suspected members of various named armed groups operating in the country of conflict. These named groups included state forces and non-state actors; or,
- Civilians, and categorisations that implied membership of armed groups (e.g. ‘terrorist’, ‘militant’, ‘security forces’). These terms might also be specific to the country of conflict, or carry particular meaning in the national discourse.

Some recorders used both these distinctions, categorising casualties by their named armed group where this was known and using generic terms where it wasn’t. Recording status by armed group membership (which is how we will refer to both these distinctions) requires categories and definitions that are particular

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15 However, some recorders whose work did not give high levels of confirmation used IHL-based categories – see section 2.2.2.4 p21
to the context, the conflict actors, and the way in which the conflict and its participants are perceived in the country of conflict (for example is the violence seen as ‘terrorist’, ‘religious’, ‘political’, ‘economic’, etc.).

Recorders who chose to categorise by armed group membership instead of combat status gave the following reasons for doing so:

- The recorder was not particularly concerned in principle with using legal categories, or with legal accountability. Therefore, they did not see it as necessary to spend time on categorising by combat status categories;

- The recorder found it more helpful to categorise by the terms used and accepted by those operating in the country of conflict. For example, it might be acknowledged by all that a casualty was a member of a particular armed group, but disputed whether he should be labelled a civilian or a combatant at the time of his death (for example because it was unclear if he was directly participating in hostilities, or if he had a continuous combat function – see section 2.2.2.1 p15 for difficulties those categorising by combat status could encounter). Under these circumstances, classifying by combat status could create controversy based on legal argument that recorders felt would be a distraction from the discussion they wanted to start, about the consequences of violence for communities. Classifying by armed group membership but giving all available information about a casualty’s death in order for others to weigh up the evidence, whilst emphasising that armed group membership was not a determination of combat status, was a way to try and avoid this;

- The existence of an armed conflict or the legality of certain types of violence was disputed, and using combat status could again have distracted discussion about casualties away from the results of violence to a focus on the politics of whether a recorder’s categorisations might imply certain armed actions were legitimate;

- Detail on armed group membership was more readily available than information about combat status. Using armed group membership (and noting that it did not denote combat status) bypassed entering into civilian/combatant controversy where there was not enough information available to the recorder to make a decision on the exact involvement of a group member in a conflict (e.g. whether they had a combat function in the group or not);

- Using a range of categories reflecting various named armed groups and other terms (e.g. ‘terrorist’, ‘militant’) was considered by the recorder to be helpful for reflecting all the ambiguities and controversies about status in the country of conflict. In certain countries there might be a dispute over the combat status of police forces, local government officials, or armed groups who had signed truces with other parties to the conflict. Recorders could avoid these controversies by categorising by armed group membership. At least one recorder used an armed group membership category in combination with categorisation according to combat status in order to circumvent such a dispute. The group that was considered ‘civilian’ by some and ‘combatant’ by others in the national debate was allocated to a different specific category and displayed in a different list by the recorder, so that data users could make their own decisions on the question. Some recorders felt that categorising victims by named armed group was a more precise way to describe them and their relationship to the conflict;

- Recording group membership can indicate involvement or possible involvement in violence, but does not make a definitive judgment on this question (recorders will often state that it makes no judgment on this question at all), again avoiding debates that recorders did not want to get involved in.

Cutting across most of these reasons, the advantage to recorders of categorising status by armed group membership was that it allowed recorders to be flexible and sensitive to the context in the country of conflict. Such sensitivity was necessary in order to further their goals. Some felt that using this type of categorisation helped them to express their records in the way that would be best understood in the country of conflict. Some recorders reported that whom local communities saw as a civilian was often different to the view that IHL might give. Where recorders did not have enough information to make decisions on combat status, and especially where questions of combat status were particularly controversial, using this type of categorisation allowed recorders to avoid getting stuck on these discussions, in their opinion. Some recorders commented that though status was a very important detail
and a key goal of many recorders was to show the effect of conflict on civilians, entering into a discussion of combat status as a legal distinction would have meant that their key messages about the conflict’s effects would have been obscured by arguments that they were not necessarily qualified to have. These recorders felt that concentrating too heavily on status could be a smokescreen.

2.2.2.3 Women and Children

Depending on the context and dynamics of the conflict, some recorders developing their own definitions (both of combat status and armed group membership) found that it was feasible to automatically classify women and children as civilians. For women, this was generally because the recorder observed that it was culturally unacceptable in the country of conflict for women to take part in hostilities, and so it was highly unlikely that they would ever be combatants. This would not be an accurate assumption in all contexts. Regarding children, some recorders considered that they should always be counted as civilian because of their age, even if they were recruited as combatants.

Recorders used different definitions of when children became adults: this was variously stated as 12, 15, or 18. On this question, rule 135 of the ICRC’s customary IHL study states that all three definitions can be supported. The Convention on the Rights of the Child states 18, unless “under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier”. All three ages are found in rules for the protection of children in the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols. For example: 18 is the limit for pronouncement of the death penalty; 15 for recruitment and participation in hostilities; 12 for arrangements for children to be identified. Rule 135 of the customary IHL study states that the age of 15 is the most commonly used: there is no definitive answer, and national laws use different ages.

2.2.2.4 What Type of Status Categories Do Those Using Different Models of Recording Use?

Practice varied between recorders in their use of status categories. The following factors influenced how they chose to categorise status:

- The sources, investigations and level of confirmation they were able to achieve in their work;
- Their aims, guiding principles, and their relationship with international and local law and legal frameworks and processes;
- How status was seen and discussed in the country of conflict.

This variation in categorisation of combat status will now be examined according to the model of five approaches to casualty recording set out in section 2.3 of 'An Overview of the Field'.

Multiple source investigation

All those using this model specifically stated that they used IHL for their categories and definitions of status. They used the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols, and guidance from the ICRC’s studies of Customary IHL and Interpretive Guidance on the concept of direct participation in hostilities.

IHL was important to these recorders on principle as a framework. The information and documentation on casualties produced by almost all of these recorders was also used in legal processes. The distinction between civilian and combatant was important to these processes. These recorders did not develop their own definitions but sought to stick to IHL because of this, and because in their opinion there was no greater authority on the question of status than IHL, even if they felt that IHL did not provide every answer.

The nature of the work that these recorders did, conducting detailed on the ground investigations and using the widest possible range of sources for all cases, meant that they could make the most detailed evaluations on questions such as whether a victim was directly participating in hostilities at the time of their death. However in common with other recorders, they still faced dilemmas and uncertainty when recording status.

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Recording using an on-the-ground network

All of the recorders surveyed who used this model categorised by combat status. Some specifically stated that they used definitions and categories found in IHL or human rights laws for their status categorisations. The rest stated that they developed their own categories, but felt that these were close to, or were in some way inspired by the definitions and categories found in IHL.

Most of the recorders using an on-the-ground network contributed or intended to contribute their information about casualties to legal processes. Others used status categories to draw attention to the nature of the conflict and how it affected civilians, with the aim of political change.

All these recorders were closely connected by the nature of their work to local communities, which were a source of information. For most this meant that they could obtain detailed information about victims and their deaths, which can be crucial to categorising by combat status. This capacity for detailed investigation was not available to recorders for every victim however, or for all recorders using this model. Where a recorder could not carry out these investigations, they relied on the categorisations their sources gave them. They recorded status having assessed the reliability of their source’s information using their own confirmation procedures.

Document-based recording with on-the-ground corroboration

Most of those using this model stated that the lower level of verification and certainty about casualties that this approach generally gave them affected how they categorised casualties. The definitions and categories used were based on available information and the conclusions the recorders felt were supportable by the evidence. The nature of this approach meant that in most cases recorders did not have a chance to confirm casualties’ status beyond assessing the reliability of the reports of their sources. These sources sometimes only gave categorisations and little context for recorders to assess. In the case of some casualties, recorders were able to conduct more detailed on-the-ground investigations.

The majority of those using this model categorised by armed group membership. As well as the other reasons for using this type of categorisation (which related to the specific context they were working in as described above in section 2.2.2.2), the vast majority stated that a reason for categorising by armed group membership was the lack of opportunity to make detailed investigations into combat status. Categorising the status of a casualty was important to many of those using this approach so that patterns and trends in violence could be analysed and attention drawn to the need for better policies, for example. For this goal, categorisations according to legally defined categories were less important. One recorder also stated that the categories they used were created to suit the target audience of the work.

A minority of those using this model categorised by combat status. One stated that they used IHL for their definitions and categories of status, despite facing the same problems of confirmation as others using this model. This recorder used rules (see section 2.2.3.2 p24) to deal with doubt over combat status, and made clear how they reached their conclusions. Recorders could and did use the general rules and concepts of IHL and other legal frameworks, even when they were not working to the highest standard of proof. If the intention was to draw attention to possible crimes, the use of these definitions did not mean that a legal judgment was being made, as the recorders themselves stressed. However, it did situate the recorder’s casualty records in a universal framework, which some found useful. IHL was also important as a framework on principle to some recorders using this model.

Document-based recording

The limitations of the sources available to most (though not all) recorders using this model, again, meant that a high level of certainty or confirmation about status could often not be achieved. Some reported that this affected which definitions and categories they used – i.e. they chose not to use IHL-based categories.

Some recorders using document-based recording stated that they used the definitions and categories found in IHL for assigning status. The most significant concepts for these recorders were regarding civilian protection from attack and participation in hostilities. These recorders found IHL important on principle. They also found it valuable because in all the categories they used, they always tried to refer to external authorities for the most authoritative and widely applied definitions. One of these recorders worked in an organisation concerned with the protection of civilians in armed conflict. This depended on an understanding of the legal distinction between civilians and combatants.
Others who used document-based recording thought that they did not have a strong enough evidence base to use legal definitions. Therefore, they developed their own operational definitions of the civilian/combatant distinction. Armed group membership categories were also used by recorders doing document-based recording when there was less information about combat status than group membership, and where recorders felt it was more useful in the country of conflict to use armed group categories (see the reasons to classify by armed group membership in section 2.2.2.2 above p19).

Recorders using this approach again often recorded status by reporting the categorisation that sources gave (following an assessment of these sources), in the absence of information about the context of the death.

2.2.3 Decision Making

This section looks at some challenges that recorders faced in categorising the status of victims, and the common procedures used by recorders to deal with these difficulties.

2.2.3.1 Dilemmas That Recorders Confronted When Recording Status

Almost all recorders reported facing difficulties and dilemmas when making status categorisations. They encountered either contradictions, ambiguity or vagueness in the evidence about how a victim should be categorised, or barriers to investigating status. Difficulties in determining status that recorders had to overcome arose for a number of reasons:

- The victim’s family or armed group gave misinformation or concealed a victim’s status;
- The perpetrator of the incident gave misinformation or concealed a victim’s status;
- Difficulty accessing relevant information;
- Grey areas in the definitions that the recorder used and/or data sources used.

The Victim’s Family or Group

Recorders reported that victims’ families or groups gave them misinformation for a variety of reasons. For example:

- A family member can have an interest in their loved one being categorised as a combatant (or more specifically, a member of a certain armed group or armed force) in order to make a claim for benefits from that group or the state following the victim’s death;
- An armed group can have an interest in claiming a civilian who has died as a member of their group, and may give incentives to a family to support this categorisation. In one example given by a recorder, the group used the death as propaganda in order to try and inspire others to fight with them;
- On the other hand, an armed group may wish to have members of the armed group recorded as civilians, in order to inspire criticism of the state or other parties to the conflict. This can also be an attempt to minimise casualty figures that could indicate military weakness.
- Groups also claimed their members were killed in combat when they were not, for example if a member was caught in the crossfire of a clash that they were not involved in. This might be to preserve a certain image of the casualty for the armed group or the victim’s family, or again to try and inspire others to join their fight.

The concealment of the facts about a victim’s status would generally not be intended to obstruct the recorder’s work in particular. Recorders normally did not have a role in deciding who should receive war benefits, for example (though at least one did assist the state on this question), and were often just one voice in the debate around casualties in the country of conflict. Misinformation would be intended to affect general public or community perception of the victim, different armed groups, or the state, or in the case of state war benefits to influence a certain state agency in particular.

Motivations of the Perpetrator

Parties to the conflict can have an interest in reporting civilians that they have killed as combatants for propaganda purposes, in order to avoid criticism, or to conceal war crimes. Some recorders reported that state perpetrators tampered with evidence about incidents in order to make it appear that the casualties were combatant when they were not. For example, they ensured that bodies were found with weapons or in uniforms. Alternatively, state perpetrators registered the death of a supposedly unknown combatant victim.

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and conducted a burial far from the family’s residence, in order to conceal the status and identity of that victim, who was in fact a civilian. Both state and non-state perpetrators also used more straightforward tactics of misinformation, such as publicly announcing the deaths of supposed combatants, who were in fact civilians.

**Difficulties Accessing Information**

This can have two different causes:

- Limitations to the recorder’s resources and capacity to investigate, and limitations of their sources;
- Deliberate restrictions placed by others on information, and restrictions on physical access to it.

When faced with possible misinformation or inaccuracy, where a recorder had no capacity to independently investigate, has difficulty accessing remote areas, or has no alternative sources to those that might be giving unreliable information, the recorder has difficulty in drawing robust conclusions on status. This is also the case when a recorder has conflicting information from different sources, which appear equally reliable, or when the sources available don’t give enough information. For example numbers killed in an incident may be reported but not the status of victims. (For a full discussion of how recorders handled their sources and the sources’ limitations, see the paper ‘Evaluating Sources’.)

Various recorders reported that the government in the country of conflict tried to restrict access to information on casualties. They sometimes did this by blocking access to information from certain areas completely. Alternatively, governments or government agencies restricted information by making statements about casualties themselves, but not permitting independent investigators to enter the relevant areas. By these means the government became the only available, but not necessarily trustworthy, source.

**Grey Areas in Definitions**

Some recorders who used the definitions and categories found in IHL reported that these did not give them enough clarity on all questions of combat status. They found that there were ambiguities around issues such as:

- When the actions of armed civilians should be counted as participation in hostilities. For example, whether a civilian whose private house was under attack should be considered as having died a combatant if he was killed defending it. Recorders also found that the status of civilian militias – communities organised to protect their local areas from the conflict parties where they felt the state was unable to do this – was also ambiguous.
- Soldiers who were not participating in hostilities or off duty or on leave at the time of their death.

Others who developed their own definitions found that there were certain types of cases that it was very difficult to define unambiguously. For example, one recorder recorded deaths caused by an armed group that coercively conscripted many of its members. When these individuals died fighting for the group, the recorder found it difficult to decide whether they should be considered civilians or combatants. On the one hand the casualties were participating in hostilities against their will; on the other hand they were integrated into the armed group and essential to its military operations. The recorder decided to set a cut-off point following forcible recruitment after which the casualty would be considered a combatant.

**2.2.3.2 Rules that Casualty Recorders Applied to Assigning Status**

Recorders took a variety of approaches to resolving ambiguity over status, and dealing with cases that could not resolve:

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17 For other papers in the collection see [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection)
Investigation and Confirmation Procedures Applied Generally

The general procedures that recorders used to investigate and deal with information, which are discussed in more detail in the paper ‘Evaluating Sources’, were the first rules that were applied by recorders to decisions on status. These included:

- **The use of ranges.** For incident-based casualty recording, where there were variations in reported numbers of civilians and numbers of combatants killed in an incident, some recorders used a range in their published figures to express the maximum and minimum reported killed of each status. Some included all reported figures in their range whilst others excluded the highest and lowest figures, for example.

- **Taking the view expressed by the majority of sources.** Where conflicting opinions on status were expressed by sources, some recorders used the opinion expressed by the greatest number of sources.

- **Prioritising the view of certain types of sources.** Some recorders used a hierarchy of sources in order to decide which accounts to prioritise. For example, some assumed local media sources were more reliable than international media sources, or vice versa. Others took court or inquest decisions as the most authoritative source, even if they contradicted other sources.

- **Discussion within the recorder’s organisation.** Many recorders had a practice of taking difficult cases to team discussion in order to get different perspectives and collectively decide how to record a casualty. Sometimes this involved seeking opinions from more experienced individuals in the organisation, or those with a specific expertise relevant to the case. In some organisations difficult cases were referred up the organisation’s hierarchy. Many recorders recorded the decisions made on difficult cases in a codebook or central list of rules, so that these could be applied in similar cases in the future. They did this to make their information more consistent.

As discussed in section 2.5 of ‘An Overview of the Field’, a good practice that is central to robust recording is to record what information is available at the time, and revise, add to and correct this later as new information becomes available or new investigations are possible. Recorders applied this to recording status.

Assistance from Legal Experts or Opinions

A very small minority of recorders who used IHL categorisations had access to the opinions of in-house legal experts to help them with status categorisations. Where recorders were using definitions and categories that were based in the law, the perspective of a legal expert provided guidance and interpretations on grey areas. Not all recorders will be able to access such opinions, or find them desirable to seek, but this would be a useful model for some. In combination with other procedures, the use of such opinions helped recorders with the presentation of their records as objective and trustworthy.

Investigating the Broader Context in Which Casualties Occurred

In cases where the status of a victim might be being concealed, part of many recorders’ investigation procedures was to look at the broader context in which their death occurred, including events that came before and after it. For example, some recorders reported that where casualties were reported to be members of armed groups, but there were community protests and petitions to state authorities following the deaths, this was significant to an evaluation of whether these victims were in fact civilian. Such protests were not normally seen when members of armed groups were killed. Where an armed group claimed a victim as a member, but did not give details of their role or participation in the group, this would also be suspicious to the recorder. Knowledge of the context in the country of conflict was important to identifying ambiguities that might not be obvious to outsiders or those unaware of contextual nuance. One example given was of victims reported to be ‘students’, which is a civilian category. However, students joined armed groups involved in the conflict in significant numbers, so more investigation into their possible membership of armed groups was necessary.

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18 For other papers in the collection see [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection](www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection)

19 For other papers in the collection see [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection](www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection)
Using Default Categories

Recorders applied default categories in different ways:

- Several recorders reported that they would categorise a victim as civilian where there was no information available about possible involvement in hostilities or with armed groups. In these cases civilian status was decided by default if there was no evidence to justify another categorisation. Others preferred to place such victims in an ‘unknown status’ category to reflect the information that was available (see the next section on dealing with ambiguity when publishing, below).

- Where there was ambiguity regarding status – that is, some information suggesting that the victim was a civilian, some that they were a combatant, or where the evidence did not easily fit either definition, and the decision could be made either way – many recorders reported using civilian as their default category. Those who used IHL for their definitions felt that this was supported by IHL rules. Though this can be a useful rule, one recorder who used IHL categories and connected their casualty information to legal accountability processes commented that they would collect more information and do more detailed investigations when it was suspected that a civilian had been killed, because of the possible legal implications. Recorders using this rule might also apply other strategies when publishing, as listed in the next section below, such as keeping cases unpublished or using an ‘unknown status’ category where they felt there was not enough information to support any categorisation.

- For others, where there were reports of suspicion or allegations that a victim was involved in hostilities or with armed groups, the default would be to uphold these suspicions and record the casualty as a combatant. Recorders who applied this rule generally did not have the resources to investigate cases in more detail, and felt that it would be more cautious to categorise the case based on the allegations than to discount them.

Dealing With Ambiguity When Publishing or Releasing Information

When the strategies described above did not result in a recorder being able to make a definitive decision on whether a victim was a civilian, they had to decide how to deal with ambiguous or incomplete information in their published records or numbers. The main strategies were:

- **Record a status and state its ambiguity.** Recorders would use the status that was best supported by the evidence despite the uncertainty, but show what their decision was based on so that others could draw their own conclusions. A recorder might publish notes on the case showing the evidence and the ambiguities, or use a tool such as a verification scale to indicate the quality of the evidence that they had about a victim’s status.

- **Keep the case pending or unpublished.** Where a decision could not be made because of a lack of conclusive evidence, some recorders chose to not make a categorisation, not publish or release the case of that victim, and not include the case in the numbers they released. The recorder would keep what information they had in their information system in case more evidence became available later. Recorders took this approach when status information was impossible to confirm. Recorders who took this approach stated that information that was too limited or contradictory was not useful for them to put in their public records anyway. This was because their aims were, for example, to create a historical record or provide accurate information for humanitarian response planning, for which complete information was needed.

- **Use an ‘unknown status’ category.** Several recorders used an ‘unknown status’ category in their public records. These cases would be updated if new information emerged. The advantage of using an ‘unknown’ category was that it allowed recorders to show the extent of human losses in a conflict without having to make a conclusive (and possibly controversial) decision on status for every victim. An ‘unknown’ category was used by recorders to address gaps in information, in order to record a case even when some details were missing or unconfirmed. ‘Unknown’ categories were used by recorders beyond status for both personal details e.g. name, age and incident details e.g. perpetrator.

- **Record the total number of people killed in an incident and numbers of those with a known status.** Several incident-based recorders used a ‘people killed’ or ‘total killed’ category for each incident they recorded. This might work alongside the use of ranges, to demonstrate the state of knowledge about the number of victims and their status. For example a recorder might report that an incident killed 4-6 people, 2 of which were civilians and 1-2 combatants. The remaining 2-3 victims were not assigned a status, but just kept in the total figures. Using a ‘total killed’ category indicates another principle that recorders applied more broadly when dealing with ambiguity. This
was to have a more general category available that could be used when more specific information could not be found or confirmed. ‘Total killed’ bypasses a decision on status; ‘people’ covers ‘civilian’ and ‘combatant’. Where information on ‘village’ is not available, location might be expressed by more general categories such as ‘district’ or ‘province’. The more general level of information might be recorded alongside the more specific categorisation where available, to help when recorders ran analysis on their records (see section 3.1 below p29 for more discussion on this theme).

Taking the discussion of status categories as a whole, two themes emerge: recorders often need to adapt their work to the country of conflict or to their audiences, or to the sources of information available to them.

It is clear that IHL and other bodies of law are important to recorders in their status work, either because the principles of IHL are important to them, they are seeking authoritative definitions, or one of their goals is to support legal accountability. Because of the contentiousness and importance of status categorisation to the political and legal discourse around casualties, recorders have to make context-specific decisions about how they approach status categories, depending on both their goals or who uses their data, and the political environment.

3. CONSTRUCTING DEFINITIONS AND CATEGORIES

Recorders must consider several practical questions when developing definitions and categories. The main issues to consider are:

- The definitions and categorisations that can be supported by the sources of information that they have access to;
- What would be most effective for fulfilling the recorder’s objectives, including:
  - What is required by or would be most useful to those who use a recorder’s information on casualties for specific purposes (e.g. legal, humanitarian response);
  - What a recorder needs to do in order to maximise the impact of their work with other audiences in the country of conflict and elsewhere (including to avoid unnecessary controversy and appear objective);
- Whether it would be helpful to use externally created definitions and categories, or whether this could create difficulties. Certain categories will always be very specific to the country of conflict, such as the named perpetrator groups of violence (though generic terms exist that cover these such as ‘state forces’ and ‘non-state actors’). Other categories such as the status categories civilian and combatant can be universal, in this case because these concepts exist in IHL. Recorders may choose not to use these universal categories where they feel this:
  - Would be too controversial and create a distraction from what they were trying to achieve (this was especially raised regarding the law);
  - Would not be supported by the information they had access to; or
  - Would make the recorder’s data less comprehensible or relevant to audiences in the country of conflict.

Returning to the discussion at the start of this paper on the importance of definitions and categories, and the recommendations for developing a casualty recording system in ‘An Overview of the Field’, when developing definitions and categories recorders should consider taking the following steps, which are good practices emerging from this study:

- **Constructing a data model before starting recording.** That is, setting out the pieces of information to be collected, the categories, and the links between different pieces of information.
- **Constructing a codebook before starting recording.** A codebook can define the pieces of information to be collected, categories within them, and the definitions of these for the benefit of those using the system, as well as for others who are interested in the recorder’s methodology. A codebook will also set out the recorder’s inclusion criteria. Such codebooks should be dynamic, so that developments such as key decisions on difficult cases can be integrated consistently into future work.

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20 For other papers in the collection see www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection
• Publishing definitions and categories (as long as it is safe to do so). This transparency can help demonstrate the objectivity or neutrality of the recording process and the strength of methodology. It can help both the credibility of the work and the ability of others to use the work.

Developing good definitions and categories, as with much else in casualty recording, depends on good knowledge of the context and the available sources of information. This section does not give recommendations for particular contexts, but aims to look at the general picture in definitions and categories. The general principle used by some recorders of creating category hierarchies in their data models, from the more general to the more specific, is therefore discussed, alongside other potentially useful principles for dealing with vagueness in data, in section 3.1 below. The external and universal sources that recorders mentioned as helpful to building definitions and categories are also set out in section 3.2 (p31). The possibilities and desirability of universal standards in definitions and categories in casualty recording is discussed in section 3.3 (p32).

To give some context to this discussion, the full range of pieces of information collected by the recorders we surveyed (excluding a small number of specialised details) are listed here (this is a reproduction of the list in ‘An Overview of the Field’). Many of these details require breaking down into defined categories in order to be recorded (e.g. perpetrators), or must have the format of their recording decided before recording starts (e.g. dates and locations):

**Incident details:**
Date of event; Location of event; Numbers killed; Groups or people taking part in violence; Groups or people that caused death, injury or harm (perpetrators); Group or people that claimed the attack; Weapons used or other means of death, injury or harm; What led to or followed the incident or what other incidents it is connected to; Are war crimes/IHL violations suspected – if so type of violation; Whether the incident was a combat incident or not; Satellite or aerial images

**Perpetrator details:**
Perpetrator group e.g. military unit involved; Number of perpetrators; Names, ranks of perpetrators; Location of the armed groups/people causing harm

**Victim details:**
Name of the victim; Nicknames, nom de guerre, alternative spellings of names, pseudonyms or aliases assigned for victim anonymity; Name of victim’s father, mother, or grandparents; Age (either in years/age range/whether the victim was a child or adult); Sex/gender; Occupation or place of work; Marital status; Whether they were a parent or not, if so number of children; The location of their hometown or place of residence; Place of birth; ID number; Military unit/rank (where relevant); Nationality; Ethnicity; Religion; An image or a photograph of the victim; Personal stories or descriptions of the person; Membership of any group or organisation, or any public positions held; Relationship to other victims

**Details about individual victims’ deaths:**
Status of victim i.e. were they a civilian/combatant; Was the person detained; Group or person that caused their death; Weapons used; Cause of death; Place of injuries on the body; Date of death; Date of injury causing death, if different; Date of hospitalisation, if different; Date of discovery of a body; Date victim was last seen alive/of disappearance; Date of burial(s); Date of exhumation; Location of death; Location of injury causing death, if different; Location of hospitalisation; Location where body was discovered; Location of burial or grave; Location where victim was last seen alive/of disappearance; Further details of how a victim was buried (e.g. photos of gravesite, was it a mass grave, was religious ceremony observed); Who was the death reported to and what follow up was there e.g. inquest, post-mortem, court case etc.

**Source details:**
Type of source; identifying details of eyewitnesses (e.g. name, address, etc.); Locations of eyewitnesses at the time of incident
3.1 Dealing with Vagueness When Constructing a Data Model: Hierarchies and Other Tools

As mentioned above in section 2.2.3.2 p24 and in ‘Evaluating Sources’, records often have to deal with vagueness in their data: a recorder might have enough information to justify the inclusion of a case in their records, but not the ideal level of detail for all the pieces of information that they want to collect. The examples given above were of having location information at the level of ‘district’ but not ‘village’, and being aware of the total number of ‘people killed’ in an incident, but not the number of ‘civilians’.

Because in these cases the recorder has enough basic information to document a case, they must find a way, when constructing their data model, to capture more vague data too. For recorders who will use software to perform analysis on their casualty data, vagueness or doubt must be expressed in a way that can still be understood by this software – that is, it must be formalised, converted from narrative to standard units of information that can be processed to give results on trends, produce statistics, and so on.

There are a number of ways to handle dilemmas in categorisation and vague information, through recording at a level that covers the information that a recorder holds. The examples given above were:

- Recording ‘total killed’ where ‘civilian’ or ‘combatant’ could not be determined, or
- Recording ‘district’ or ‘province’ where ‘village’ information was not available for the location of an incident.

This allows recorders to document cases for which they do not have the ideal level of detail for all the pieces of information that they are collecting, but do have enough information to justify the inclusion of a case in their records. This means that cases that are more vague on some details can be usefully included in certain kinds of analysis that recorders might wish to do, for instance (using the examples above):

- To look at the trends across time in the number of people killed in the conflict, or the size of conflict incidents
- To look at the impact of the conflict on different administrative areas of the country of conflict across time

Including the maximum number of cases that could be confirmed according to the recorder’s minimum criteria means that a more complete picture of casualties would be included in the recorder’s analysis. In the examples above, where a recorder wished to analyse the proportion of civilians and combatants killed, or the effects of violence on particular villages, the analysis would necessarily be based on a less complete picture.

In terms of how these different levels of detail about different pieces of information can be expressed in a data model, hierarchies of categories are one simple way of keeping lower precision information in an overall analysis, and are explained in detail below. For location, the technique integrated into a recorder’s information system might be to record an ‘outline’ around the location where an incident happened. This might be the boundary of a village, or a province. For imprecise dates, recorders might use a date range.

Recorders using any of the five approaches identified in section 2.3 of ‘An Overview of the Field’, and storing information on either an incident or individual basis, might have to deal with imprecise information and take vagueness into account in the construction of their data model. However, imprecision will be most important as an issue to recorders using limited source material for incident based recording.

**Hierarchies of categories**

Using hierarchies requires recorders to split up a piece of information into general categories, then split these into more specific categories, and so on. The recorder can then perform analysis at the level of specificity required. Recorders with custom-built databases may have the ability to run reports of data at these different levels of detail built into their system. This will make analysis at different levels of detail easier for the recorder. Other using tools like spreadsheets for their information system will find these reports more time consuming to generate.

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21 For other papers in the collection see [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection)
To demonstrate how a hierarchy of categories might work and be built, we use the example of ‘weapons used’ in an incident. The discussion below is based on categories used by different recorders in the survey, but is for illustration only and should not be seen as a model. This illustration looks at how two reports, of ‘gunfire’ in a village and of an attack involving forces armed with ‘AK-47’s, would be categorised and analysed using a hierarchy.

In Figure 1, the most basic level at which a recorder would categorise ‘weapons used’ might be into aerial and ground attacks (1):

The next level in the hierarchy might be to divide these two categories into the general types of weapons deployed from the air or on the ground (2).

Both the incident of ‘gunfire’ and involving an ‘AK-47’ come under the general category ‘ground attack’ and the more specific category ‘gunfire’ in the above. If a recorder were to run a report of all incidents which were a ground attack or incident, both these incidents would be included in this report, along with all incidents from ‘explosive weapons’, ‘mines and UXO’ and ‘other weapons or causes of death’ under the ‘ground attack’ umbrella. If a recorder ran a report on ‘gunfire’ from ground attacks the results would include these two incidents but exclude ground attacks or incidents from ‘explosive weapons’, ‘mines and UXO’ and ‘other weapons or causes of death’ as the level of detail required had become more specific. The same principle applies, as the hierarchy gets more precise: Figure 2 follows the path down the weapons hierarchy to ‘AK-47’ (with other arrows representing other parts of the hierarchy, which we will not fill in for the sake of this example).

Figure 2 shows how building a hierarchy involves creating more specific subset categories within umbrella ‘parent’ categories that cover them. Analysing information at the level of the less specific categories will
therefore include records that are categorised more specifically. So, the incident where the weapon was reported to be ‘AK-47’ will be included in any analysis of incidents involving ‘Automatic weapons’, because this category covers ‘AK-47’. It will also appear as a case in any analysis involving the categories ‘small arms and light weapons’, ‘gunfire’ or ‘ground attacks’, as reaching ‘AK-47’ requires passing through these categories in the hierarchy, until this level of specificity. Using a hierarchy means that a recorder does not have to choose between using more specific or less specific categories, but just to decide how these cover each other, and how more specific categories branch off or are divided up. Where recorders use their own custom-built software this will mean that, for example, a weapon recorded as ‘AK-47’ will be recognised by the system as also meaning ‘automatic weapons’, ‘small arms and light weapons’, ‘gunfire’ and ‘ground attack’ for the sake of running reports. Where a more basic information system such a spreadsheet is used recorders will have to do this manually.

A disadvantage of using hierarchies is that they force each category to be a subset of just one ‘parent’ umbrella category. This might not always reflect all the aspects of any given situation that a recorder may wish to capture. For example, a recorder may wish to have umbrella analysis categories of ‘explosive weapons’ and ‘suicide attacks’. A ‘suicide bombing’ would fit under both of these. A more accurate way to construct the data model in relation to weapons in this case would be to consider weapon types as sets of categories, with subsets of more specific weapon categories within them, which may partially overlap with other sets.

Developing universal hierarchies or sets for pieces of information like weapons (which might be defined universally more easily than other pieces of information like perpetrators or status, being more technical in nature) could be a useful topic for discussion when considering issues of standards and standardisation in casualty recording.

3.2 External Sources for Definitions and Categories Used by Recorders

The external sources that recorders used in their work on definitions and categories are summarised here. It is beyond the scope of this study to investigate all potentially useful external sources for definitions and categories. If practitioners believe that such a study would be useful, this could be pursued as a future project towards developing resources and standards in casualty recording.

3.2.1 Legal Sources

Sources of IHL that recorders used to develop definitions and categories were:

- The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols
- The ICRC’s study of Customary International Humanitarian Law
- The ICRC’s Interpretive Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities under International Humanitarian Law

The rules of and commentary on IHL were used by recorders for guidance on status categories (as described in section 2.2.2.1 above (p15)).

They were also used for categorising incidents of violence according to possible violations of IHL. Guidance on how to categorise violations was found by recorders:

- For recording the wilful killing of a protected person, in Rule 89 of the ICRC’s study of Customary IHL, Violence to Life, by using the guidance on status, and assessing the motivations of the perpetrator;
- For the concept of indiscriminate attacks, in the ICRC’s study of Customary IHL: Rule 11 Indiscriminate Attacks and Rule 12 Definition of Indiscriminate Attacks; Rule 71, Weapons That Are by Nature Indiscriminate;
- For other deliberate actions causing the death of protected persons, in Rule 97 Human Shields; Rule 103 Collective Punishment;
- For enforced disappearances in Rule 98 Enforced Disappearances of the ICRC’s Customary IHL study, and in the Declaration on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance.
Other legal sources included:

- UN Security Council Resolutions that call for the consequences of violence to be monitored, for example Resolution 1612 on Children in Armed Conflict, which was used by recorders to justify monitoring the killing of children as a specific group;
- Treaty and customary law (Rules 81, 82, and 83 of the ICRC's Customary IHL study) on landmines, (as well as the definitions used by the Landmine and Cluster Munitions Monitor of explosive remnants of war, which is not a legal source), for casualties caused by those weapons;
- The legal framework around extrajudicial killings. Guidance on this is found on the website of the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights;
- The constitution in the country of conflict, which some recorders used for their status definitions.

Some recorders submitted information to the International Criminal Court (ICC) under Article 15 of the Rome Statute. Article 15 allows the prosecutor to open an investigation with the authorisation of the Pre-Trial Chamber of the ICC, having assessed the evidence submitted. One recorder reported using the ICC’s Case Matrix information system to record information about cases of casualties in accordance with the framework of the ICC. The Case Matrix is one component of the ICC’s Legal Tools Project, and its main function is as a database to organise information and evidence on cases of international crimes. The recorder who used the Case Matrix reported that it was useful for guiding how and what they recorded for the purpose of making submissions to the ICC.

The Rome Statute itself and commentary on it is a source that should be further investigated as potentially useful to recorders on questions of definition and categorisation.

3.2.2 Other Sources

Some recorders reported using existing categories or ways of defining different pieces of information from sources other than the law:

Some recorders mentioned using sociological or academic sources for their definitions and categories. One, for example, used the codebook of ACLED to assist them. This codebook defines categories of incidents and perpetrators, and ways of recording location, which the recorder built on for their own purposes. The definitions of other institutions and projects researching conflict may be of use to some recorders. Some recorders based in universities or who were career researchers developed their definitions and categories out of their own academic work.

Some recorders mentioned using categories found in military manuals in the country of conflict to categorise different types of incidents. As mentioned above in section 2.1.1.6 (p11) some also used categorisations of violence developed by truth commissions or similar bodies in the country of conflict.

Some recorders also reported that the categories and definitions used in the work of various inter-governmental organisations provided a useful basis for developing their own. Questionnaires used by the ICRC and UNHCR were noted as providing a good reference for developing categories.

3.3 The Question of Standards and Standardisation in Definitions and Categories

As mentioned above in section 1.3 (p4), one minimum professional standard that recorders could adopt is to keep and share a record of the definitions and categories that they use and the procedures to apply them, for their internal use and for external relations.

The picture regarding possible global standardisation of the definitions and categories used by recorders is more complicated. As discussed earlier in this paper in relation to inclusion criteria and status, recorders use various definitions and categories, which are based on a variety of frameworks or are developed by recorders, often for specific reasons or with specific purposes in mind. Due to the importance of context to recording in general and definitions and categories in particular, a worldwide standardisation of casualty information may not be possible, or indeed desirable to individual recorders. There may be advantages in

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22 More information about the Case Matrix can be found on the Case Matrix Network website and through following links on the ICC website. NGOs and others can request a copy of the Case Matrix software to use in their work.

23 The Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED), associated with the International Peace Research Institute (PRIO) www.acleddata.com
global standardisation for the recognition and credibility of those working in the field of recording, and uniformity might build global authority. However, recorders who tailor their definitions and categories to what they thought was most effective in the country of conflict might not find this helpful.

Within the field, recorders who use the same kinds of categorisations or have similar goals or frameworks may find it useful to discuss and harmonise their definitions, learning from each other’s experiences to solve problems common to their approaches and make these more robust. For example, those working with the concept of a ‘direct conflict death’ might find it helpful to develop or agree on a standard definition to refer to; those using legal sources might wish to discuss how to do so in the most useful way. There may also be scope for more technical and slightly less politically charged categories, such as weapons, to be standardised. This may be especially helpful to new recorders.

As with casualty recording in general (see section 2.5 of the paper ‘An Overview of the Field’), there is a spectrum of practice in developing and using definitions and categorisations. At one end of the spectrum are those who have limited sources and are more interested in trends, so do not or cannot prioritise the most detailed definitions and categorisations. At the other are those who are using a wide range of sources to build up a very sophisticated picture of human losses. For the purposes of building historical memory or contributing to legal accountability these require higher levels of detail in definition, and confirmation in categorisation. Different approaches can feed into each other. On the question of status, for example, some recorders stated that they hoped to further confirm the information they had when new investigations became possible in the future. Some saw their work as a starting point for others to examine the combat status of casualties (as opposed to their armed group membership) for the purpose of investigating possible human rights violations. In order for the information produced by the range of approaches at each stage of violence to feed into each other effectively, some kind of standardisation in data could be desirable. As mentioned elsewhere (see section 4.2 of ‘An Overview of the Field’), some users of casualty data would also find the global standardisation of casualty data useful. Such standardisation would mean that a global picture of deaths from violence could be generated, made up of information that is comparable.

One component of standardising casualty recording would be the standardisation of the pieces of information collected. This would include defining which are the compulsory or minimum pieces of information required for recording. Standardising the format of these pieces of information, and the categories they are divided into, would be harder to achieve, given the variety of recorders’ methods and contexts. Standardising definitions for each category (e.g., ‘civilian’) would be the next step, and harder still. Standardising the investigation and confirmation procedures that casualty recorders used to apply these definitions and categories would complete data standardisation, but would require a uniformity of methodology and sources that the field does not have, according to our research. Such uniformity might not be possible to achieve – for example it will often not be feasible to conduct forensic investigations in the short term, even with unlimited resources, and other methods of establishing a record of casualties (as identified in the five approaches to recording in section 2.3 of ‘An Overview of the Field’) will need to be relied on. Though such complete standardisation might not be possible or desirable, certain professional standards that can apply to all types of recording whilst acknowledging differences between them could still be agreed on (such as the key features of a model recording system described in section 3.2 of ‘An Overview of the Field’).

The possibilities for three of these components, according to evidence gathered during this research, are as follows:

1. **Standardising Pieces of Information Collected**

Attempts this would take recorders towards a common data model (standardising format and categories would complete such a model). Agreeing on how to name the full range of different pieces of information that recorders might collect, such as ‘perpetrators’, ‘status’, ‘location of incident’, and defining which pieces of information are essential and which should be optional (depending on the sources available to

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24 For other papers in the collection see [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection)

25 For other papers in the collection see [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection)
recorders, or the context) is something that is achievable. Setting the limits of the field in terms of the minimum and ideal standard of information that casualty recorders collect could pave the way towards the goal of defining and developing casualty recording as a recognised field of work.

The terms applied to some pieces of information may be more difficult to reach consensus or standardisation on than others. For example, casualty recorders record information about the violence that caused a victim’s death in a variety of ways: by descriptions of an incident; by dividing incidents up into different types; by categorising the weapons used (e.g. was it a bombing, a shooting); or by recording a cause of death. In a universal model, these distinctions could be kept under a broader piece of information of the violence causing death (as described in section 3.1 above p29) or alternatively could be collapsed into a single piece of information, which could require recorders to change how they worked.

2. Standardising Format and Categories

Standardising the formats for recording pieces of information, and the categories that these pieces of information are divided into, could be a complicated task. To take some specific examples:

- Standard categories for recording status may not be possible to use or useful to recorders, who often make specific decisions to record status in various ways. However, different types of status categories could be recorded as separate pieces of information (i.e. ‘combat status’ ‘membership of armed groups of forces’).
- The age of victims was recorded in a variety of ways: by recording a date of birth; by recording the age of the victim in years, and an age range; by recording whether they were a child or an adult according to the age limit set by the recorder; or by whether they were reported in sources to be a child or an adult. On the distinction between children and adults, national laws, the definitions recorders consult, and the sources that report deaths from conflict may have different interpretations of the age at which children become adults, making global standardisation that is still relevant locally to recorders more difficult (see section 2.2.2.3 p20) This also makes age hard to reconcile or convert into a hierarchy.
- For recording locations, latitude/longitude or GPS coordinates could be a universal standard. However, these would still have to be translated into expressions of political territory of administrative boundaries in order to be meaningful to audiences. Also, many recorders did not have access to this precision of location information, or not for every case. The recording of location would have to first be standardised at the level of the least specific geographical unit that recorders found it acceptable to document location by. This might for example be the province, with the option of recording by more specific units: district, town, and coordinates. A complication in recording location is the difficulty in selecting a standard map: administrative boundaries can be drawn differently, or towns named differently, on different maps. Sources may describe locations according to other maps or in different ways. Also, administrative boundaries can change over time, and locations not longer ‘exist’.
- For recording perpetrators or participants to violence, generic categories such ‘state forces’ and ‘non-state actors’ could be generated for the sake of global standardisation, but named perpetrator groups will always be locally specific. If recorders adopted a common data model, some categories would always have to exist outside it, or there would have to be very context specific levels in categorisation hierarchies.

As suggested above, for more technical data such as ‘weapons used’, for which categories will be less politically charged or otherwise complicated, a universal set of categories could be useful and achievable.

3. Standardising Definitions

Adopting common definitions across the field of recording could be challenging for key pieces of information. This is especially true where there are no universal definitions, or the limitations of the sources that recorders used would prevent them from conforming to such definitions.

For example on combat status, even if status is divided up into the agreed categories of ‘civilian’ and ‘combatant’, these cannot be applied in the same way by all recorders. For example, some recorders who use the term ‘combatant’ have to rely on the reports of their sources, rather than a detailed evaluation of the victim and the circumstances of their death to apply the term as found in IHL. These are in a way two different uses of the word combatant – the standard of proof is different. This issue could potentially be overcome by increasing the number of categories – e.g. ‘civilian’, ‘reported civilian’, ‘reported combatant’, ‘combatant’, but the qualifications for each of these would have to be carefully defined.
Working towards standardisation in definitions and categories could serve the aims of: building a more unified and recognised field; helping certain users of casualty information to use the work of recorders more; giving new recorders a useful and robust framework or template for starting their work. These advantages must be balanced against the substantial amount of work that standardisation would take, and whether recorders’ need for sensitivity to context could be sufficiently incorporated. Some recorders documented globally, or in several different locations. Global standardisation of definitions and categorisations might be possible. Whether such standardisation should be pursued depends on whether it can be compatible with the goals of individual recorders.

4. CONCLUSION: KEY PRINCIPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This paper explored the importance of definitions and categorisations to casualty recorders, and some key considerations that recorders should reflect on when approaching these (see section 3 p27). Definitions and categories can be politically charged and highly controversial, and recorders will often have to engage in controversy with the definitions that they use. We argue that openness about these issues, and allowing the audiences or users of a recorder’s information to make their own decisions about the accuracy of definitions and categorisations through disaggregating information, can help to neutralise these controversies and build trust in the reliability of a recorder’s work. A key principle is that recorders should always update information to constantly improve the records and make them more accurate. Both definitions and the categorisation of victims and incidents according to these should be revised as new information emerges.

4.1 Good Practice

The general principles of good practice recommended in this paper, drawn from analysis given throughout the paper, are summarised below:

**Good practice in developing and applying definitions and categorisations:**

1. Produce written guidelines or handbooks
2. Train workers in definitions and categories in a consistent way
3. Design and implement multiple-stage procedures of checking the information that enters a recorder’s system, to ensure that definitions and categories are consistently applied
4. Have routine structures or space for the discussion of difficult cases
5. Develop definitions and categories in advance as much as is possible (but be prepared for these to evolve to meet challenges in the handling of data, and the needs of audiences) considering:
   a. What definitions and categories can be supported by the sources of information that the recorder has access to
   b. What would be most effective for fulfilling the recorder’s objectives, including:
      i. What is required by or would be most useful to those who use a recorder’s information on casualties for specific purposes (e.g. legal, humanitarian response)
      ii. What a recorder needs to do in order to maximise the impact of their work with other audiences in the country of conflict and elsewhere (including to avoid unnecessary controversy and appear objective)
   c. Whether it would be helpful to use externally created definitions and categories that could provide some standard for the recorder to stick to, or create difficulties.
6. Consider the use of tools to formalise data (such as hierarchies) to deal with the variable level of detail sometimes found in source material (see section 3.1 p29)

**Good practice on definitions and categorisations when information sharing (see section 1.3 p4):**

1. Openly available definitions and categorisations help different recorders compare information more easily between themselves
2. Transparent definitions and categories also mean that other information users can compare, use and integrate recorders’ information more easily
Good practice with controversy:
1. Where casualty figures are a controversial political issue, and it is safe to do so, transparency about definitions and categorisations can help recorders demonstrate their objectivity (see section 1.3 p4)

2. Where it is controversial or ambiguous whether certain deaths should be considered conflict-related, deaths from different causes/types of violence can be disaggregated into different lists. This allows data users to make their own judgments about whether to consider these deaths in their own analysis (see section 2.1.1.5 p10)

Good practice when excluding certain casualties from records:
1. Where there are a number of ambiguous or borderline cases at the edges of a recorder’s inclusion criteria, collecting all available information and then assessing and categorising it into the categories that a recorder is concerned with could increase accuracy and comprehensiveness. The contrasting approach would be to exclude source material that does not refer specifically to the casualties a recorder is concerned with (e.g. civilians) (see section 2.1.1.2 p8)

Good practice in using categories relating to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) or other areas of law:
1. Where possible, recorders could find it helpful to consult legal experts when developing and using these categories, so that legal concepts or categories are used as appropriately and accurately as possible, and in a way that is most useful to recorders (see section 2.1.1.6 p11)

4.2 Professional Standards and Standardisation of the Field

Section 3.3 (p32) of this paper discussed the potential for the standardisation of:

- The pieces of information casualty recorders collect;
- The formats and categories they use to describe these pieces of information; and
- The definitions of different categories that they use.

Casualty recorders should collaboratively consider the possibilities for such standardisation, including how it could benefit (or hinder) their work and the development of the field.

Particular issues in the development of professional standards and standardisation raised in this paper were:

- How should the limits of what is a ‘direct conflict death’ and what is an ‘indirect conflict death’ be set? (Section 2.1.1.4 p9)
- Could the use of IHL by casualty recorders be dangerous to their credibility, or is it a helpful source for definitions that can and should be used? (Section 2.2.2.1 p15)
- Could universal hierarchies or sets for some pieces of information (e.g. weapons) be useful to recorders? (Section 3.1 p29)
- Would a study of all possible external sources for definitions and categories be useful to recorders? (Section 3.2 p31)

Casualty recorders should also collaboratively consider these issues, for the development of their own work and the field more generally, including the usefulness of their data to others.
Oxford Research Group (ORG) is a leading independent think-tank, non-governmental organisation and registered charity, based in London. ORG has been influential for thirty years in promoting the idea of sustainable approaches to global security as an alternative to violent confrontation, through original research, wide-ranging dialogue, and practical policy recommendations.

ORG is committed to the principle that every life lost to armed violence should be properly recognised. For this to become possible, every casualty of armed violence, throughout the world, must be promptly recorded, correctly identified and publicly acknowledged. In support of this goal, the Every Casualty programme at ORG (www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/rcac) works to develop an improved understanding of the range of available casualty recording practices, along with guidance for their implementation. This work has included extensive research into existing casualty recording practice, research which is contributing towards the identification and development of standards and good practice that can be implemented by a range of actors, including non-governmental organisations, states, and intergovernmental organisations alike.

In addition to carrying out research, ORG facilitates an International Practitioner Network of casualty-recording organisations (www.everycasualty.org/practitioners/ipn) and is at the forefront of integrating policy goals into existing policy frameworks at the national and international level.

Please direct all enquiries about this collection to Elizabeth Minor elizabeth.minor@oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk.

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