CASUALTY RECORDING: Assessing State and United Nations Practices
Joint Summary of Findings and Recommendations
Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) and Oxford Research Group (ORG) are members of the Every Casualty Campaign, which calls on states, in partnership with other actors, to ensure that all casualties are promptly recorded, correctly identified and publicly acknowledged. See www.everycasualty.org/campaign

This paper is available for download at http://ref.ec/joint

For clarifications and comments
Action on Armed Violence: Serena Olgiati, Senior Policy and Research Advisor, solgiati@aoav.org.uk

Oxford Research Group: Elizabeth Minor, Senior Research Officer, Every Casualty Programme, elizabeth.minor@oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk

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Parents of children killed by gun violence gather at Chicago church. Scott Olson/Getty Images News/Thinkstock.

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Knowing the true costs of armed violence is essential to addressing the rights and needs of those affected. However, in many, if not most, areas affected by conflict and high rates of armed violence, there is no authoritative, comprehensive and detailed record of casualties.

The practice of casualty recording is receiving increased international attention. The UN Secretary-General’s reports on the protection of civilians in armed conflict for 2012 and 2013 both stress the importance of recording casualties. The Secretary-General has recommended that the UN establish a common system to record civilian casualties.1 Numerous states and UN actors have brought attention to the need for casualty recording in discussions at UN Security Council open debates on the protection of civilians. Yet, despite this interest, no body of evidence about states’ and the UN’s actual practices in casualty recording had been consolidated – at least until now. AOAV and the Every Casualty Programme at ORG have undertaken research to address this gap, resulting in the publication of two separate, but complementary reports:

- Counting the cost: Casualty recording practices and realities around the world, Action on Armed Violence, 2014, aoav.org.uk/2014/counting-the-cost

This joint summary draws on both reports to highlight the key benefits of casualty recording and practical ways forward that can advance this practice.
AOAV and ORG understand ‘casualties’ to include both individual deaths and injuries directly resulting from armed violence. Injuries constitute demonstrable physical or psychological impact on the victim, sustained directly from armed violence. ORG’s research for this project has concentrated on the recording of direct civilian casualties from armed conflict.2

Casualty recording strives to achieve the comprehensive, systematic and continuous documentation of individual casualties from armed violence, and/or the incidents in which these occur. It is distinct from ‘casualty tracking’, which involves a conflict party systematically gathering and analysing data about their own operations, and its effects on the civilian population.3 Casualty recording is also distinct from statistical techniques that use a sample of cases to estimate total numbers of casualties.

AOAV has approached this project in two ways, undertaking both desk research and field research. Field research comprised targeted interviews with local actors from 33 institutions recording the casualties of conflict and armed violence in Colombia, Indonesia, Liberia, Mexico, the Philippines, and Thailand. Through desk research AOAV investigated further examples in Brazil, Burundi, the former Yugoslavia, Guatemala, Iraq, Jamaica, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, the UK, the USA, and Venezuela.

ORG investigated practice and perspectives within the UN on recording direct casualties from armed conflict, with a focus on civilian casualties. ORG interviewed 24 UN staff working for different agencies and offices in New York and Geneva about their experiences of, and attitudes towards, casualty recording and information about casualties within the UN system. ORG also undertook a case study of the civilian casualty recording practice of the Human Rights unit of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), for which 13 individuals within and outside UNAMA were interviewed, and reports and commentary were reviewed.

DEFINITIONS AND METHODOLOGY

The importance of casualty recording is demonstrated by its benefits to a range of political, humanitarian, and human rights objectives, as documented by our research. These are summarised here. A crucial finding across the cases we examined is that where casualty data is credible, impartial and reliable, it can be used to effectively address the rights and needs of those affected by violence. Most of those interviewed for this research record both deaths and injuries. Information on the injuries caused by armed violence is essential to many of the benefits listed below.

INFORMING POLITICAL DEBATES AND ACTION

The numbers of deaths and injuries caused by armed violence remains a matter of major concern at all political levels. Robust information about casualties, when leveraged politically, can be a catalyst to the undertaking of concrete steps that reduce levels of armed violence. Those who seek to influence policy-makers will use evidence about casualties to show the need for change, and to support advocacy that brings it about.

AOAV’s research showed how casualty data is used in the Philippines to monitor the implementation of peace agreements. Several actors are very closely monitoring any violations of the agreement between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. If peace is maintained, which a low incidence of casualties and violations can help show, this will likely strengthen public support for the government during the 2016 presidential elections.

Within the UN, information about casualties was identified as crucial for encouraging policies and action to decrease the harm suffered by civilians in armed conflict, by the individuals surveyed by ORG. Informing discussion and action by UN Member States in New York and Geneva was a goal in this regard. Using casualty information to leverage change from actors within conflict-affected countries, including all conflict parties, was also seen as a key activity.

DEVELOPING AND EVALUATING POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

Casualty data is often used to evaluate policies and programmes, or to draw attention to specific patterns of armed violence that require new responses to address their effects.

In Thailand, the government has used casualty data produced by Deep South Watch, a research centre monitoring violence in Southern Thailand, to evaluate the impact of the Emergency Decree of 2005. The Decree extended state powers and restricted certain rights, and was introduced after a spike in violence in the South. Based on what Deep South Watch’s casualty data and other information they collected showed about the Decree’s effectiveness in suppressing the conflict, the government decided to lift the Emergency Decree in three districts of the Southern Provinces.

UN respondents reported that casualty recording can or has supported different UN actors with: conflict analysis and situational awareness; humanitarian response and development planning, by helping identify areas of risk and need; and programming such as mine action, including identifying areas where clearance or risk education activities need to be prioritised.

SUPPORTING VICTIMS’ RIGHTS

Without data about who has been killed and injured, states cannot ensure access to the services needed by victims (who include survivors and the families of those injured and killed). Casualty recording helps fulfil existing international instruments that support the rights of victims. Whilst certain states have established strong mechanisms to record the victims of violence and use this information to address their rights and needs, much remains to be done.

A positive example of how casualty recording is being used to enhance the rights of victims comes from Colombia, where the government has established a comprehensive system to record all victims of the conflict, in order to provide reparations and compensation. The Victims Unit, charged with supporting the victims of conflict, has registered 6,073,453 people who suffered different kinds of victimisation between 1985 and January 2014. According to the Unified Victims Registry established by the Unit, more than five million registered victims have been displaced by the conflict; 636,184 were victims of homicide (this includes those victimised by the homicide of a loved one: spouses and first degree family members); and just over 10,500 are landmine survivors.4
In Afghanistan, the Human Rights unit of UNAMA (UNAMA HR) systematically records civilian casualties. UNAMA HR uses this evidence base to advocate with parties to the conflict to review, revise and – where tactics cause harm to civilians – change, policy and operational practices. This has contributed to changes in policy that have reduced civilian casualties, and, in turn, to safeguarding the right to life and protected status of civilians in armed conflict. UNAMA HR also supports the material assistance of victims through referral to appropriate organisations, and by confirming on request to one compensation programme whether victims’ cases are verified in their own records. Several UN respondents reported that casualty recording was important to addressing the needs of those affected by conflict, drawing attention to its potential to support UN humanitarian, development and assistance programming.

PREVENTING AND REDUCING ARMED VIOLENCE

Casualty recording can contribute to armed violence prevention and reduction. AOAV’s report shows how data on deaths is used in different contexts to identify patterns in homicide. This knowledge facilitates the design of policies and programmes tailored to addressing these. As an example, data collected by the Development, Safety and Peace Programme (Programa de Desarrollo, Seguridad y Paz, DESEPAZ) in Cali, Colombia, showed that homicides were concentrated during holidays and in nightlife areas. In response to this evidence, the mayor of Cali designed a programme that included a ban on firearms on weekends, public holidays and election days, and an aggressive confiscation policy for those who violated this. An evaluation of this policy showed a decrease in homicide rates of 14% throughout the periods when the policy was implemented.
One of the most important functions of casualty information that was identified and stressed by UN respondents in ORG's study was the prevention of future deaths and injuries. The success of UNAMA HR in encouraging and contributing to changes in the policies of conflict parties, shows how this can be achieved. A number of respondents asserted that casualty recording should be an essential first step in UN efforts to support the protection of civilians in armed conflict. Given the difficulty of gaining influence in some political contexts, this may not always succeed. Yet without casualty recording, a key tool for leveraging action for violence reduction is missing.

INFORMING AND SUPPORTING ACCOUNTABILITY
Data produced through casualty recording can and has been used in legal proceedings. Such proceedings generally require a high standard of confirmation, including data resulting from detailed investigations. Accuracy, detail and credibility in information are essential. Our studies show that in the collection and release of information, casualty recording systems should and can balance the need for thorough and comprehensive evidential details with the urgency of making initial information available, for example for humanitarian purposes.

Data from casualty records was used at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the case against Slobodan Milosevic. In Peru, the case against former president Alberto Fujimori, and in Guatemala, the case against ex-military ruler Efrain Rios Montt, also utilised data produced through detailed casualty recording.

UN respondents in ORG's study reported that effective action on casualty information can enhance compliance with the law, by contributing to changes in the policies of conflict parties as detailed above. Casualty recording also gives a basis to call for the investigation of possible violations, and the holding to account of perpetrators. In Afghanistan UNAMA HR draws the attention of relevant authorities to cases of possible violations, based on casualty documentation.

OTHER PURPOSES
Casualty data has been used to evaluate direct and indirect economic costs of violence. In 2004, for example, the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development showed that armed violence had cost the 90 most-affected countries in the world more than 95 billion USD.5

Finally, AOAV found that in certain cases casualty data can enhance law enforcement practices. In Thailand for example, data on casualties is used to track the location of perpetrators and to define military and police operations to identify them. This is a controversial area: data can be used to inform armed responses that do not support any longer-term strategy designed to address the underlying causes of violence, but are instead aimed at gaining short-term wins.
From the evidence-base of this research, AOAV and ORG have elaborated a number of recommendations for the advancement of casualty recording. The recommendations are addressed to states, UN actors, civil society and academic institutions. Our recommendations are based on the benefits discussed above, as well as on a number of challenges to the practice of casualty recording that were identified during the research.

**STRENGTHEN POLITICAL COMMITMENT**
Having recognised the various benefits of casualty recording, states should come together, in partnership with others including international organisations and civil society, to commit to the principle of casualty recording and discuss avenues to promote and strengthen these practices.

**RECORD INJURIES AS WELL AS DEATHS**
In addition to improving the recording of deaths, attention should be paid to strengthening injury-recording systems. AOAV’s investigations show that a reduction in homicide rates does not automatically correspond to a decrease in the overall rates of violence. Knowledge of the extent of non-fatal violent acts enhances the development of long-term adequate responses. It is highly important for any recording system that uses casualty information to improve responses to violence, support victims’ rights, and evaluate the impact of policies and programmes. Recording systems should be set up as early as possible to facilitate the verification of cases, provide an opportunity for trend analysis and inform well-timed action. They should also record information on the injured after their hospitalisation in order to provide evidence on the long-term impact of armed violence.

**ADOPT A COMPREHENSIVE SCOPE**
Casualty recording can be initiated to respond to international obligations or particular policy goals. Systems might collect information only on cases that constitute a violation of human rights, or only record victimisation from certain types of weapons. In order to best support the protection of civilians, it is important to under-
stand how different types of violence are inter-connected. To address this, it is recommended that casualty recorders monitor casualties from all forms of violence. Some casualty recording systems focus exclusively on deaths and injuries due to conflict. Though there may be strategic reasons for a system to concentrate, for example, on the direct civilian casualties of conflict, attention should be paid to how multiple benefits can best be achieved - throughout the duration of a conflict, in post-conflict, and in situations of armed violence more broadly.

**BENEFIT FROM TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES**
Data management systems, and the spread of affordable technological devices, can facilitate and improve the quality of casualty recording. Such technology can support the prompt recording of incidents, standardisation of data, and safe storage of information. It can also make it easier to retrieve data and share it with different actors. Crucially, using appropriate software can facilitate detailed analysis to better underline the trends and features of armed violence. Although the latest tools cannot necessarily be used in all situations, there are often accessible and relatively cheap ways to enhance data analysis. Jamaica’s experience in using geospatial instruments to record crimes is one example of how technology can support casualty recording. Freely available platforms such as Ushahidi® and IMSMA® can provide direct support to casualty recorders.

**DEVELOP AND APPLY STANDARDS TO IMPROVE DATA AND FACILITATE ITS USE**
Data must be robust and credible in order to be applied effectively to the purposes identified above. Within the UN, common principles and basic data standards for casualty recording should be developed. AOAV and ORG have identified, through our research, actions that can improve the quality of casualty recording. These are relevant to all those engaging in this practice. We are already using research findings and dialogue with civil society practitioners to support the development of standards for the field, which UN, state, and other actors should find useful.9 Reinforcing aspects of previous findings,10 evidence from our respective studies showed that adopting the following can strengthen casualty recording:

- **Strong validation and confirmation mechanisms and quality checking procedures.** Using these means that data can be used more effectively for purposes that require solid evidence, for example providing assistance to the victims of violence, and supporting accountability.

- **Multiple sources of information.** Using multiple sources is fundamental in order to obtain the most detailed and systematic classification of deaths and injuries. Different agencies may have information inaccessible to others, due for example to the different areas or populations that they cover. Sharing of experiences among different actors can also help overcome limits within individual systems, which may then adapt or refer to experiences in similar contexts elsewhere.

- **Transparency.** The methodologies used to gather casualty data should be transparent, and detailed, disaggregated information on deaths and injuries should be made publicly available (where appropriate, safeguards to protect victims, witnesses, and others should be implemented). A commitment to impartiality, supported by transparency regarding definitions, inclusion criteria, and the scope and limitations of a casualty recording system will lend it credibility and promote its acceptance. The benefits of publicly available disaggregated data include the ability to support useful work by others: for example, trend and location data can help local organisations and humanitarian agencies identify areas where relief operations should be prioritised.

**DETERMINE THE PURPOSE AND USES OF DATA**
Recording casualties is vital, but it is only the first step towards defining effective responses to armed violence. Casualty data should be used not only for individual result-oriented initiatives, but also aim to inform broader structural and social changes that can sustainably reduce violence. From the start, casualty recorders should consider how the data can and will be used, and ensure that it will be usable for those purposes. This is essential in order to avoid expending time and resources without contributing, in a focused way, to any of the benefits outlined above. Specifying the methods for obtaining the best information under a given set of circumstances also depends on a clear
understanding of the purpose and potential uses of data. Casualty recorders should also always have personnel with the technical capacity to analyse the data that is recorded: this in an essential pre-requisite to effective use of the data.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO SPECIFIC ACTORS

Donor countries, international and civil society organisations should commit financial resources and personnel to support affected countries in setting up locally owned and sustainable casualty recording systems. A 2011 study of Armed Violence Monitoring Systems from the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development shows that most systems are funded by individual states (55%), followed by multilateral funding (28%). A key challenge is the pervasive lack of trained personnel for casualty recording, and the impact that this has on sustaining recording initiatives in the longer term. Training more personnel would also help address the issue of under-reporting.

UN actors are encouraged to take steps to understand the application and benefits of casualty recording across the UN, and determine how the widest range of these could be effectively served. Effective civilian casualty recording systems should be designed and implemented in conflict-affected countries by the UN, building on, and learning from, existing practice. Responsibility for implementing these systems in conflict-affected countries should be determined either through giving one UN body global responsibility for casualty recording, or through determining the responsibility to implement casualty recording on a context-by-context basis.

Member States of the UN should support UN casualty recording by approving mandates and resolutions with consistent and clear language calling for casualty recording and its sustained implementation.

Consideration should be given to the complementary roles of civilian harm tracking by conflict parties and casualty recording. Having both mechanisms can facilitate evidence-based discussions between military and non-military actors in conflict environments.

Finally, academics and researchers can support our call for better and systematic casualty recording by stressing its contribution to understanding the many causal links between armed violence and its human consequences.

Members of the Thai military shield themselves during a gun battle with red shirt protesters in Bangkok, Thailand, on April 28, 2010. Paula Bronstein/GettyImages News/Thinkstock.
NOTES


2 The OECD defines armed violence as “the use or threatened use of weapons to inflict injury, death or psychosocial harm, which undermines development.” www.poa-iss.org/kit/2009_OECD-DAC_Guidlines.pdf

For this research, armed violence includes armed conflict, defined by Uppsala University as “contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year”. www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/


9 Hana Salama, Developing Standards for Casualty Recording, Oxford Research Group, 2013 http://ref.ec/standards-brief. See also the International Practitioner Network of casualty recording organisations www.everycasualty.org/ipn

