Mortality in Iraq

The uncertainty of estimates from retrospective mortality surveys in humanitarian emergencies is composed of both sampling and reporting errors. Gilbert Burnham and colleagues, in their mortality study in Iraq (Oct 21, p 1421), quantify the sampling error, but the security situation did not allow for the supervision and repeat interviews needed to estimate reporting errors.

Over-reporting of deaths was regarded as limited because 92% of reported deaths were supported by death certificates, but Burnham and colleagues do not report who issued these certificates. Neither do they discuss why the availability of death certificates increased from 81% in 2004. The existence of a substantial reporting error is supported by the finding of low child mortality. The study population only reported 54 non-violent deaths in those younger than 15 years, and 1474 births—ie, an under-15 mortality rate is of the same size as the sampling error.

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Second, household sampling within clusters was not random: only households located on or near residential streets crossing a main street had a chance of inclusion, and only if located near the “start household” for that cluster.

Third, it is infeasible that “One team could typically complete a cluster of 40 households in 1 day.”