



Sex, Drugs, and Body Counts: The Politics of Numbers in Global Crime and Conflict. Edited by Peter Andreas and Kelly M. Greenhill. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010. Pp. ix, 287. \$65.00 cloth; \$24.95 paper.)

Numbers increasingly drive policy. Government agencies justify missions and budgets with a host of statistics that demonstrate the urgency and importance of their issue area. Nongovernmental organizations rely on shocking numbers to stir public support to their cause, raise funds, and gain influence in the policy arena. International humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping missions only occur after actors reach a consensus on the number of people killed or suffering and agree that the number is large enough to warrant action. The U.S. government continuously uses statistics to assess the compliance of foreign countries on issues ranging from illicit drugs and human trafficking to financing terrorism and arms smuggling. Such decisions have wide-ranging consequences for foreign aid, bilateral trade, and diplomatic engagement.

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This irrefutable fact—that numbers play an influential role in policy making—is the focus of Peter Andreas and Kelly M. Greenhill’s new edited volume, *Sex, Drugs, and Body Counts*. The editors have collected nearly a dozen contributions from respected academics working on issues related to crime and conflict. Each reflects on the role that statistics play in their issue area. While each case is unique, the authors reinforce several important themes throughout the volume: statistics in these areas are often widely inaccurate, manipulated by political actors, and go unchallenged.

Throughout the volume, the contributors reinforce the point that statistics should not drive policy in these issue areas because it is nearly impossible to obtain reliable data. Victims of human trafficking are not known to governments until they obtain freedom and tell their stories. Because of the moral stigma associated with sex work, many who gain freedom do not come forward. In the end, as Kay Warren argues in her contribution, reports on human trafficking are based more on national reputation than real evidence. Similarly, illicit trades, because of their illicitness, are nearly impossible to measure effectively. As Andreas points out in his piece, the true extent of the global market in such areas as counterfeit items, wildlife, and cocaine is simply not known, making any data questionable. Because of this, high profile seizures are touted as successes, while they may simply be the natural result of an increase in overall trade. Conflict statistics are equally prone to inaccuracy due to the logistical issues associated with collecting reliable data in war-torn areas. Thus, it is not surprising that the statistics used in these cases often vary dramatically based on the source and fluctuate widely over time. In sum, the contributions stress that much of what we want to know is simply unknowable, and that basing policies on faulty data is not only irresponsible, but may lead to bad policy.

The challenges in collecting data on these issues also make confirming or refuting statistics used in the policy arena extremely difficult. The result is that actors manipulate numbers or selectively choose statistics for political objectives. For example, in their article, John Hagan and Wenona Rymond-Richmond point out the politics behind analysis of the conflict in Darfur. The 2004 U.S. State Department–led, and meticulously conducted, Atrocities Documentation Survey (ADS) caused Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and President George W. Bush to declare that “genocide” was occurring in Darfur, and estimates based on the data were as high as 300,000 to 400,000 dead. Yet shortly thereafter, the State Department, by that time led by Condoleezza Rice, ceased relying on ADS data, refused to reaffirm that genocide was occurring, and presented data from a new report claiming as few as 60,000 deaths in the conflict. Another such example is illustrated by Greenhill in her piece, where she points out that the U.S. and UN examined identical satellite footage, yet their estimates of Rwandan refugees in Zaire in the mid-1990s were nearly 750,000 apart. While the volume is most often focused on (and critical of) the use of numbers in U.S. policy making, examples from cases as far ranging as Israel and Bosnia demonstrate that this is a universal problem. Where data is imprecise, powerful states,

international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations will seek to champion those numbers that best support their goals.

Despite the inaccuracy of statistics on crime and conflict, and their political manipulation, the volume highlights the vigor with which we still cling to numbers. The media often cites statistics without questioning their source or validity. Governments determine important policies based on vague estimates applied to arbitrary ranking systems. To their credit, the contributors also criticize academics, including themselves, for treating statistics as reliable facts simply because they are found in a government or organization's report.

After reading the book, one gets the sense that perhaps the adage should be modified to say that a number is worth a thousand words. And in the end, it is difficult to see this changing. The volume is wanting on this respect. It spends a great deal of space tearing down the use of numbers (indeed, by the middle, the chapters already felt repetitive), but it never presents a solution. The book's main contribution is to serve as a caution to those in the policy making arena to be vigilant in interpreting statistics on crime and conflict. But in the end, given the power of numbers to shape opinion, statistics—whether accurate or not—will continue to drive policy.