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# Review of *Sex, Drugs and Body Counts: The Politics of Numbers in Global Crime and Conflict*, edited by Peter Andreas and Kelly M. Greenhill

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**Abstract**

Andreas, Peter, and Greenhill, Kelly M. (Eds.). Sex, Drugs, and Body Counts: The Politics of Numbers in Global Crime and Conflict, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010). 287 pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-4861-4 (cloth); ISBN 978-0-8014-7618-1 (pbk).

The ten scholarly papers in Sex, Drugs and Body Counts explore the generation and propagation of numbers that drive policy decisions in the U.S. government regarding human trafficking, drug trade, and armed conflict (including the war on terror). Each of these papers, written by different authors, provides an illuminating insight into how some of the numbers we hear or read in the news are derived. While the general message of the papers tends to be depressing, namely that the numbers driving U.S. policy vary from being slightly suspect to clearly fabricated, the book does provide positive examples of how accurate numbers can be obtained and how the numbers that are being used can be interpreted. As a teaching resource, the book provides instructors an opportunity to deepen their understanding of how quantitative data are used in U.S. policy, allowing them to explore these issues in class. Individual papers from the book could be used in a general education course (either in mathematics or in a field related to the topics) as a way to introduce students to reading quantitatively dense material. In a course more focused on the topics of the book and with a more quantitatively literate audience, the entire book could probably be assigned as reading.



**Cover Page Footnote**

Aaron Montgomery is Associate Professor of Mathematics and Chair of the Mathematics Department. He has been involved with Quantitative Literacy for about seven years and has been the Webmaster for SIGMAA-QL for the past six years. For the past two years, he has been teaching two courses in the Douglas Honors College: "Game Theory And Politics," and "Collapse," both of which use mathematical techniques to describe human interactions with each other and the natural world.

*Sex, Drugs and Body Counts, The Politics of Numbers in Global Crime and Conflict* is a compilation of nine papers by different authors along with introductory and concluding chapters by the editors, Peter Andreas and Kelly M. Greenhill. Based on the topics presented and the academic fields of the authors, the book is clearly aimed at those interested in sociology, political science, and international relations. This orientation may make the book too content-heavy for an introductory course in quantitative literacy (QL). However, it does not mean that the book does not offer anything to the instructor of such a course. Although including all the papers in the book in a QL course would perhaps be inappropriate, including one or two carefully chosen papers could be very beneficial. And while some of the papers are not ideal for the student, they do provide an opportunity for instructors to extend their breadth of knowledge on topics where numbers are extremely important, yet difficult to determine.

## General Readers

Because the remainder of this review will focus on the pedagogical use of this book as a tool in teaching QL, some words should be said about the book in general. I found it to be very readable and informative about the topics it presents. If one is interested in drug trafficking, human trafficking, or the cost of armed conflict in terms of human lives taken or destroyed, the book presents a good general introduction into how the quantitative numbers reported in the press are generated. There is also a significant amount of information related to U.S. government policies on these issues (such as the rankings and certifications required of the executive branch with regard to these issues).

## As a Text

My review will focus on what would help one of our typical students in a typical first-year QL course. While my own personal experience is with QL courses taught within the Mathematics Department, many of the comments below will likely apply equally well to an introductory course in other fields. The students in these courses are generally first-year or second-year students and many of them did not complete four years of high school mathematics (ending their classes with Algebra II in their Junior year). Individual student mathematical proficiency varies (with some students competent at traditional mathematical material, while other students have trouble adding fractions). The students have a broad range of interests, and the course is intended to introduce them to a broad view of how quantitative information can be used in a wide range of fields and in their daily lives. This means that there is not a significant amount of time to spend on establishing a deep background in any one field of study. Statements regarding

the usefulness of the book should be qualified to mean the usefulness of the book *for this audience* in *such a course.*

The first mismatch between the book and my audience is that the papers assume that the reader is already quantitatively literate and focus on the peculiarities of quantitative data in the topical areas. This would probably make the book a good resource for a class in the social sciences that consisted of a quantitatively literate audience, but the book would probably be too quantitative for an introductory class in quantitative literacy. For example, probably few students in an introductory course on QL would be able to wade through the information in the paragraph whose first third reads:

> In reports covering 2001 and 2002, the total number of members of the AUC was listed as "between 6,000 and 8,150." In the report covering 2003, however, the numbers were revised upward, to an "estimated 8,000 to 11,000 and an unknown number of active supporters"; the report further noted that 1,000 paramilitaries had reportedly demobilized. The report covering 2004 described the demobilization of 3,600 paramilitaries, with "about 8,000–11,000 remaining active paramilitary members with an unknown number of active supporters." (p. 235)

The rest of the paragraph is a similar barrage of figures; unfortunately, for a quantitatively illiterate student, I suspect all of this translates to something like:"There were a lot of paramilitaries and an unknown number of active supporters, some of whom were demobilized in recent years."

Without proper guidance, these students would miss the fact that by the 2005 report the cumulative total of demobilized paramilitaries (23,0000) far exceeded the original estimate of the total number of paramilitaries (6,000–8,150) despite the fact that this inconsistency is stated explicitly at the end of the paragraph (by which time many students may have skipped to the end of the barrage). Other papers are similarly structured, providing a great deal of quantitative information in a relatively short length of text. While I believe that students ought to leave an introductory course being able to decipher this information, using this book to achieve that goal may be similar to teaching swimming by dropping non-swimmers into the deep end of the pool.

The other general issue I would anticipate for a mathematics course is the depth of the book. The papers included are not intended to be general readings, but are intended to be scholarly papers. Rather than making general statements about the fact that the U.S. executive branch is charged with reporting on the effectiveness of counter-narcotics campaigns in other countries, we find paragraphs like the following.

> Amendments to the FAA [Foreign Assistance Act] during the mid-1980s expanded the provisions of Section 481 culminating in certification provisions introduced under the 1986 ADAA [Anti-Drug Abuse Act]. Of note for this chapter, the Department of State Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1984 and 1985 passed in November 1983, and the 1986 ADAA amended Section 481 to require…. (p. 77)


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In a course focusing on narcotics and politics, the inclusion of the exact acts and the dates of passage are important to the topic at hand, but in a general course on quantitative literacy this may be too much information.

If you are working with a more quantitatively literate audience or are teaching a course with an emphasis on the topics included in the book, the book would be usable in whole. However, I am going to describe how the book can be a useful resource with the audience and class described above.

## As a Resource

Despite the fact that handing the book to the students and asking them to read it on their own would lead to little advancement in the student's ability to work with numbers, the book can be put to good use as a resource for a quantitatively literate instructor. Some of the papers could easily be included as part of a class while others would broaden an instructor's collection of classroom examples. I describe the contents of some of the papers in the sections below. My not mentioning a paper specifically should not be taken as evidence that I think it is not worth reading, just that it does not fit easily into the categories described.

### *Papers Modeling Critical Thinking*

The first type of resource the book provides is a collection of examples demonstrating how to approach numerical data with a critical eye. In particular, the following chapters each have a similar flavor: Chapter 3, "Trafficking in Numbers: The Social Construction of Human Trafficking Data" by David A. Feingold; Chapter 6, "Counting the Cost: The Politics of Numbers in Armed Conflict" by Kelly M. Greenhill, and Chapter 10 "(Mis)Measuring Success in Countering the Financing of Terrorism" by Sue E. Eckert and Thomas J. Biersteker. In all cases, the papers examine quantitative data that are (or have been) generally accepted by reputable organizations with the goal of assessing the reliability of such data.

"Trafficking in Numbers" starts with historical comparisons of current human trafficking with traditional forms of slavery and describes the recent focus on protecting children from trafficking for sexual purposes. The paper then presents numbers from various sources that purport to describe the extent of human trafficking in the modern world. The numbers all come from reputable sources (United Nations, U.S. government offices, and reputable non-governmental organizations) but vary widely in the estimate of the total number of trafficked humans. After providing a quote from a reputable NGO Web site:

> The UN estimates that approximately 1 million girls [not women] are forced into the commercial sex industry each year…. (p. 55)

The paper presents precisely the types of questions that we would hope a quantitatively literate reader would raise:

> Questions abound: Where did these figures come from? How were they derived? If 1 million girls are forced into the sex industry each year, how many leave? For how long have 1 million girls each year been forced into the sex industry? Ten years? Twenty? Thirty? (p. 55)

The remainder of the paper continues in this manner, presenting questionable information cloaked in numerical data and then deconstructing the data based on reasonable questions. In particular, the book addresses the alarms that were raised regarding the 2006 World Cup Games in Germany, the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, the 2010 World Cup Games in South Africa where demand appeared to be driving the trafficking. It also discusses the alarms raised over the 2004 Asian tsunami and the 2008 cyclone in Burma.

"Counting the Cost" is very similar, but focuses on the casualties of armed conflict instead of human trafficking. It starts by presenting some startling figures on child victims of armed conflict. Like the earlier paper, these figures are being presented by reputable sources (but unlike the human trafficking numbers, this time all the sources agree on the numbers). The authors then trace these numbers to their source (or as close to their source as they can) and discover that the figures cannot be attributed to any transparent data collection. In many cases, the numbers simply appear as part of a governmental report that does not include any indication of how the numbers were determined. Of the few figures that appear to have a clear provenance, it is apparent that the number being used has been misinterpreted. This is demonstrated by the claim by UNICEF that:

> "[T]he proportion of civilian victims has been rising steadily: in World War II it was two-thirds, and by the end of the 1980s it was almost 90 percent." (p. 130)

However, tracing this figure (90%) back to the original source, the authors discover that the figure does not refer to direct civilian casualties, but also includes war-related famine deaths, which were not included in the World War II estimate.

"Counting the Costs" presents three historical examples where political motivations led to either an undercounting of casualties (Rwanda refugees in Eastern Zaire), or an over-counting of casualties (The Battle of Jenin, Kosovo). In each case, the paper discusses how and why the figures have been under- or overestimated.

The paper concludes by presenting five questions that should be raised when assessing casualty counts:

1. What is/are the source(s) of the numbers?


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2. What definition(s) is/are the source(s) employing — for example, who is a combatant? What constitutes a combat-related death? Who is a refugee? — and thus what exactly is being measured?
3. What are the interests of those providing the numbers? What do these actors stand to gain or lose if the statistics in question are (or are not) embraced or accepted?
4. What methodologies were employed in acquiring the numbers?
5. Do potentially competing figures exist, and, if so, what do we know about their sources, measurements, and methodologies? (p. 158)

"(Mis)Measuring Success" is similar. It presents some historical background on the decision to combat terrorism by freezing financial accounts. It then describes the evidence presented by President Bush to demonstrate the success of this program. However, like the previous two papers, it critically analyses these claims. As before, the figures must be viewed with some skepticism because of the opacity surrounding the methodology in gathering them. Furthermore, careful inspection clearly indicates that the numbers are not even internally consistent. Although not quite as explicit as the previous two papers, this paper presents the reader with models of how to read through numerical information and to trace its lineage back to determine its validity.

The first two papers ("Trafficking in Numbers" and "Counting the Costs") contain a section entitled "Does It Matter?" In both places, they address the issue of whether numerical analysis can be useful even in situations where virtually all numbers presented are suspect. Based on my experience teaching quantitatively illiterate groups, the material in these sections is particularly important since many students are quick to dispense with using any numerical data once they feel they can justify doing so. However, the answers presented seem to be different. In "Trafficking in Numbers," the section appears to present various situations where data are inaccurate, but little evidence that correct data would help decrease human trafficking. In "Counting the Costs," the authors provide an argument that numbers do matter when deciding how we wish to respond to the problem and, consequently, that good numbers must be sought out in order to respond on various fronts: political, humanitarian, judicial.

If your course includes a research component, then any of these papers would be a good introduction on how to evaluate numerical data found in print and online. An understanding of their contents would help encourage students to seek out data from more than one source as well as encourage students to assess data coming out of even reputable sources with an eye toward its internal consistency.

## *Papers that Provide Positive Examples*

The three papers in the previous section were featured because they would help students recognize the types of questions that a critical reader should be considering when searching for sources of information. Unfortunately, reading

only those papers might leave a student wondering what constitutes a reasonable methodology for collecting numerical data in such situations. The two papers featured in this section—Chapter 7, "Research and Repercussions of Death Tolls: The Case of the Bosnian Book of the Dead" by Lara J. Nettlefield, and Chapter 8, "The Ambiguous Genocide: The U.S. State Department and the Death Toll in Darfur"—both present examples of the types of methodologies that can provide more accurate numbers. Between the two, "Research and Repercussions of Death Tolls" provides the clearest example of the work that needs to be conducted to determine combat-related hardship. However, "The Ambiguous Genocide" presents an example of a reasonable methodology that will more commonly be employed by the sources students may access as they research contemporary topics.

"Research and Repercussions of Death Tolls" describes the work to document human loses during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s. The Sarajevo-based Research and Documentation Center (RDC) undertook this research between 2004 and 2007. The paper begins by presenting a short historical background along with the "common knowledge" estimate of the death toll (200,000–250,000). The author then proceeds to describe the work to better document the combat casualties. The group created a database to sort through the amassed collection of witness statements, pictures, and films collected by the State Commission for Gathering Facts on War Crimes. In particular, the author describes the researchers' efforts to remove duplicate listings, and to travel around the country to talk to individuals, visit gravesites, and assimilate smaller databases collected by local NGOs. After the initial data collection, an outreach campaign was launched to collect information from individuals and to allow these individuals to review the current database records. The account provides an example of a transparent process of data collection along with a clear opportunity for those who might criticize the work to raise their concerns in order to have them addressed in the final report.

The paper continues with a description of the response by those involved in the conflict. In particular, there was a strong negative response in some Bosniak circles because the results of the work (namely that approximately 100,000 deaths had occurred) contradicted the Bosniak mythology about the conflict (namely, that 200,000–250,000 deaths could be attributed to the conflict). This response demonstrates the strength of inaccurate numbers in the face of strong contradictory evidence. It is hoped students are able to learn to assess not just the numerical values themselves, but to also question whether those reporting the numbers have motives to keep the inaccurate numbers in the public eye. The paper concludes with a number of expert reports on the project that evaluate its accuracy (generally presenting a positive picture). The need to assess biases in the reporters is also a feature of the following paper.


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While "Research and Repercussions of Death Tolls" presents an example of a very accurate but time-consuming methodology for documenting casualties of armed conflicts after "the smoke has cleared," the next paper, "The Ambiguous Genocide," discusses how to interpret casualty numbers that are being collected while there is still a significant amount of smoke in the air. The paper is presented clearly as a position piece, and the position of the authors is stated clearly in the first paragraph where they "contend that the State Department has vacillated in its public policies in Darfur." Position pieces are not inherently poor QL resources, and author biases do not necessarily lead to flawed analyses. In this case, the authors have made their position clear and present their evidence, allowing the reader to weigh the strength of the evidence. As with the previous papers, this paper starts by presenting the historical background of the conflict (in this case, the armed conflict in Darfur between 2004 and 2006).

The authors first present background on the means by which casualties are counted. When assessing the level of victimization with the intent of possible criminal prosecution, the total number of deaths and displacements that occur because of the conflict is the most important statistic. In 2004, both Secretary of State Powell and President Bush declared that genocide had occurred in Darfur based on a report entitled the Atrocities Documentation Report (ADR) that estimated the human loss based on reports of deaths and atrocities committed prior to the flight to refugee camps. The authors of the paper describe how the estimates for the ADR were developed (using random sampling of refugee camp survivors) and how these estimates were extrapolated to the entire population.

This announcement, however, was reversed two years later, in 2006, based on a new report that listed far fewer deaths and atrocities. Unlike the case in "Research and Repercussions of Death Tolls," this new figure was not the result of a more careful analysis of the situation, but rather the result of a new method of counting. In particular, the death toll in the 2006 was based on statistical methods used for the purposes of humanitarian responses. These statistics focus on an elevated death rate for the population in refugee camps when compared to the death rate for the population if the emergency had not occurred. These statistics are important when making decisions regarding how to best handle the humanitarian crisis, but are not appropriate when attempting to assess the criminality of the aggressor as they do not take into account the actions of the aggressor which led the victims to flee to the refugee camps. Like "Counting the Costs," the authors of this paper emphasize that the numbers are important, but that they must be read carefully, concluding that:

> When the respective findings of such studies are not understood in terms of their limitations as well as their possibilities, the results can be misleading and lend themselves to flip-flopping interpretations. The problem is not the underlying science. The problem is more likely the diplomatic purposes to which the science is put…. (p. 214)

## The Other Chapters

The introduction (Chapter 1) sets the tone for the book, noting that it is focused on the role of numbers in policy decision, recounts some historical (pre-2000) examples where numbers have played a significant role in past political decisions, and previews the topics to be discussed in the other papers in the book. Time and space do not permit review of the four additional case-study chapters in the book: Chapter 2, "The Politics of Measuring Illicit Flows and Policy Effectiveness" by Peter Andreas, which examines the quantification of the drug trade; Chapter 4, "Numbers and Certification: Assessing Foreign Compliance in Combating Narcotics and Human Trafficking" by H. Richard Friman; Chapter 5, "The Illusiveness of Counting 'Victims' and the Concreteness of Ranking Countries: Trafficking in Persons from Columbia to Japan" by Kay. B. Warren; and Chapter 9, "Accounting for Absence: The Colombian Paramilitaries in U.S. Policy Debates" by Winifred Tate. These papers are no less interesting nor any less quantitative than the five case studies that I selected for elaboration. The concluding chapter (Chapter 11) summarizes a number of themes found in the previous papers in a section entitled Policy Pathologies and concludes with the following thought.

> The point here is not to simply reject the politics of numbers and condemn quantification, but rather to promote more careful and more educated (and yes, more skeptical) discussion and consumption of the numbers. (p. 277)

## Conclusion

*Sex, Drugs and Body Counts* consists of nine quantitatively rich papers with interesting topics. As a whole, they are perhaps a little too in depth and too quantitative for a generic general education course taught in the mathematics department, but the papers could be used in a more focused topics course on the subjects they address. Individually, one or two of the papers could be introduced to students in a general course to illustrate the type of information that can be found when researching such topics. Even if the papers themselves do not find their way into the classroom, the material in the text could provide an instructor with a broader understanding of how quantitative measures are applied to these fields. This could give an instructor who is currently unfamiliar with these issues the background necessary to explore topics that may be of interest to students who are enrolled solely to collect credit for a general education requirement. Besides, the title of the text *Sex, Drugs and Body Counts* certainly enlivens a shelf of quantitative literacy textbooks.


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