

Class, Race and Corporate Power

Volume 1
Issue 1 *Reflections on Class, Race and Power*

Article 6

2013

Iraqi Birth Defects and the WHO Report

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Recommended Citation

Savabieasfahani, Mozhgan (2013) "Iraqi Birth Defects and the WHO Report," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 6.

DOI: 10.25148/CRCP.1.1.16092146

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol1/iss1/6>

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Iraqi Birth Defects and the WHO Report

Abstract

Since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, epidemics of birth defects and cancers are rising in many Iraqi cities. In 2012, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Iraqi Ministry of Health (MoH) undertook a large-scale epidemiological study to determine the prevalence of birth defects in the Iraqi population. A report which appeared on the WHO website in September 2013, claims that "*The rates for spontaneous abortion, stillbirths and congenital birth defects found in the [Iraq] study are consistent with or even lower than international estimates.*" This article discusses the severe shortcomings of this report and questions its reliability .

Keywords

Iraq, Birth Defects, WHO

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The results of a collaborative study on the prevalence of birth defects in Iraq has appeared on the World Health Organization's (WHO) website (1). This study was co-funded by the WHO and the Iraqi Ministry of Health (MoH). The joint investigation started in May-June 2012 and the results were scheduled to be released in early 2013. However, its publication was delayed several times. Last summer, repeated petitions were sent to the WHO and MoH. Following these demands the report finally appeared on the WHO website on September 11th 2013. The aim of the study was to examine the prevalence of congenital birth defects in a number of geographically dispersed areas of Iraq, which were exposed to bombardment or heavy fighting, or were unexposed.

This investigation was initiated following widespread public alarm over unusual increases in poor reproductive and birth outcomes in Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion. Across Iraq, increasing numbers of birth defects are surfacing, including in Mosul, Al-Ramadi, Najaf, Fallujah, Basrah, Hawijah, and Baghdad. In some provinces, cancers also are rising (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8). Sterility, repeated miscarriages, stillbirths and severe birth defects -- some never described in any medical books (9) -- are reported widely.

Damning evidence of birth defects was referenced in a BBC documentary, which aired in March 2013, entitled "***Born Under a Bad Sign***" (10). A senior official of the MoH, told the BBC: "All studies done by the Ministry of Health prove with damning evidence that there has been a rise in birth defects and cancers" in Iraq.

The September report declares "no clear evidence" for any abnormality in rates of "spontaneous abortions", "stillbirths", or "congenital birth defects" in Iraq. "Damning evidence" for a rise in birth defects is reversed to "no clear evidence"? Experts have received this abrupt change in the conclusions of this study with suspicion (11). "

Major criticisms of the report include its anonymity. No authors or responsible offices are identified by the report. The dramatic reversal of the results is also alarming. Even though data analysis is prone to variations in output, which can lead to potential changes in conclusions, for a change of this magnitude extensive data manipulation must have taken place. How and why the data was manipulated to render such drastically different results remains unknown to the reader. The report fails to provide information on exposure status. High exposure and low exposure groups are not identified, making any comparisons between participants impossible.

The "*methods*" also appear to have major shortcomings. Selection bias issues cannot be ruled out from the information provided in the report. Misclassification and measurement errors may be contributing to the unreliability of this WHO report on Iraqi birth defects.

The WHO's history of suppressing information from Iraq (12) offers no comfort. Dr Keith Baverstock, the lead author of a WHO report linking the US and UK use of depleted uranium in Iraq to long-term health risks, says that his report was 'deliberately suppressed' (11).

Hans von Sponeck, former UN Assistant Secretary-General, told Radio New Zealand, on Sunday 22 September 2013, that the WHO-released report on birth defects was "whitewashed" (13).

Iraqi doctors, and the Iraqi public, have repeatedly asked for help in dealing with birth defects. A Google search for “Iraqi Birth Defects” generates over a million and half results.

Who will respond to the Iraqi population? What is our responsibility towards the people of Iraq?

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