

Beyond Numbers: The Ethical Implications of Quantifying Human Tragedy*

Ethical considerations in the analysis of Auschwitz victim data

Abbass Sleiman

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1 Introduction

“A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic”. This quote, generally attributed to Joseph Stalin, highlights an important, and often neglected, aspect of data analysis and statistics as a whole. When dealing with large bouts of data, it is easy to forget the underlying meaning of each data point. When discussing the implications of economic policies on unemployment rates or homelessness, what a statistician may see as a simple change of a few percentage points is in reality the profound disruption of countless families and individuals, thrust into hardship and uncertainty. When seeking to evaluate wars or conflicts, what may simply appear as numbers on both sides is in reality the deaths of countless individuals and the destruction of homes and livelihoods.

2 Ethical Considerations in Data Analysis

As individuals looking to understand the world with data, it is our responsibility not only to conduct sound statistical analyses, but to make the appropriate ethical considerations necessary when deciding how to use this data. Dropping a data point for the sake of a statistical argument is in reality omitting someone’s story, a story that, depending on the context of the study, can be harsh or heartbreaking. Each decision made when conducting analysis on data should be thoughtfully evaluated. It is not enough to make statistical decisions in the pursuit of arbitrary measures of statistical power, but instead each decision should be made with the aim of authentically capturing the human narratives hidden within the data.

You can and should cross-reference sections and sub-sections

*Code and data are available at: https://github.com/AbbassSleiman/shiny_essay

3 References