



FAQs: ACLED Fatality Methodology

Does ACLED have a minimum fatality criterion for events?

No — ACLED does not have a fatality threshold for event inclusion. This means that conflict and demonstration events in ACLED do not have to produce any fatalities in order to be included as a valid event. No arbitrary number of deaths is used to define a conflict.

How does ACLED code fatalities?

ACLED codes fatalities from the most reliable possible sources and/or partners in a given conflict environment. Further, researchers seek out information to triangulate – where and when possible – the numbers from any report.

ACLED uses the most conservative estimate available, and will revise and correct the totals – upward or downward – when better information becomes available.

What about when the number of fatalities is not known?

When a report does not note whether any fatalities occurred or not, or notes that it is unknown whether fatalities occurred at all, ACLED defaults to coding '0' as the fatality estimate. ACLED distinguishes between 'fatalities' and 'casualties'. Fatalities are assumed to be deaths. Casualties are assumed to be injuries *or* fatalities; as such, if a report only notes 'casualties', the conservative approach that ACLED takes is to assume all casualties are injuries and hence report 0 fatalities.

When a report notes that an event did indeed lead to fatalities, yet there is no additional information on how many fatalities may have occurred, ACLED relies on a series of standard questions to estimate that number:

- a. Is this a significant attack, in an active warzone? If yes, fatalities are estimated at 10.
 - i. E.g. An airstrike is dropped on a building in Yemen, resulting in an unspecified number of fatalities. [*Yemen is a warzone and an airstrike is likely to yield high casualties*]
- b. Is this an attack of more limited scope, in an active warzone? If yes, fatalities are estimated at 3.
 - i. E.g. A bomb explodes at a checkpoint in Afghanistan, resulting in deaths. [*Afghanistan is a warzone, yet checkpoints are often not manned by large numbers of people*]
- c. Is this an attack outside of a warzone? If yes, fatalities are estimated at 3.
 - i. E.g. Intercommunal violence in Guinea leads to a number of deaths. [*Guinea is not a warzone, and intercommunal violence tends to not result in mass fatalities*]
- d. Is this a significant attack outside of a warzone? If yes, fatalities are estimated at 10.
 - i. E.g. A large-scale attack by Al Shabaab results in an unspecified number of fatalities in Kenya. [*Kenya is not a warzone, yet this is a large-scale attack involving an actor in a neighboring warzone*]



A country is defined as a war zone if a single group or coalition is attempting to violently challenge the legitimacy and authority of the central government, and that same group is active in over 20% of the state; this assessment is conducted qualitatively. For a list of country-years ACLED defines as ‘in war’, see the end of this document. Conflict zones are those countries in which organized political violence is occurring, yet not up to the threshold of a war zone. Unrest refers to riots and protests; in some countries of ACLED coverage, there might not be much conflict occurring yet unrest may be commonplace. Disorder, meanwhile, occurs across all countries of ACLED coverage; this refers to all political violence and demonstration events.

In some cases, reports will note a vague estimate, such as ‘tens’ or ‘dozens’ or ‘hundreds’. In such cases, ACLED will defer to the most conservative version of that estimate: coding 10 for ‘tens’, 12 for ‘dozens’, 100 for ‘hundreds’, and so on.

Do ACLED policies result in underestimating fatalities?

Possibly — given that ACLED defers to the most conservative reported number and have a range of numbers (3, 10) for uncertain cases that are standard across warzones and outside of them. But ACLED aims to provide the best, if lower, estimate of fatalities rather than entirely arbitrary ranges also built on assumptions.

What are the known biases of fatality numbers?

ACLED emphasizes that fatalities are often a poor approximation of a conflict’s form and impact. They are often debated and can vary widely. Conflict actors may overstate or under-report fatalities to appear strong to the opposition or to minimize international backlash. And the numbers can be off simply because it is difficult to collect exact data mid-conflict – especially if doing so in real-time.

The true cost of conflict cannot be measured by deaths alone. Conflicts that result in fewer deaths may still cause instability that ultimately result in additional deaths from food insecurity or lack of access to medical facilities, for example. Further, battlefield deaths are biased towards men’s experiences of armed conflict. While more men may be killed in fighting or may be targeted to reduce populations from which opposition can recruit reinforcements, women and children are often the victims of sexual violence and other forms of violence “off the battlefield”. These may not necessarily result in death, and concentrating on such disregards those experiences if we were to rely on fatality counts alone.

How reliable are fatality numbers generally?

Fatality numbers are not consistently reliable from any source. All reported fatalities, from all forms of media and partners, are *estimates*. Some media are better at estimates, some are worse. Some (e.g. international media) will report on stories only if they reach a certain fatality threshold that elicits audience attention. Other information sources (e.g. in-depth human rights reporting by INGOs) will concentrate on attacks on civilians, regardless of fatalities. ACLED incorporates all forms of media and



reporting to maximize the accuracy, reliability, and thoroughness of each component of its data, including fatalities if they occur.

ACLED advises caution in using fatality numbers from any conflict data source. Fatality information is the most biased, and least accurate, part of any conflict report and extreme caution should be employed when using any fatality number from any source.

What alternatives exist to assessing a conflict besides fatality numbers?

'Deadliness' of a conflict is essentially a proxy for the threat it poses to civilians. But the threat of a conflict is multifaceted; it is based on where violence occurs, over which time period, who is targeted, how they are targeted, and why they are targeted. Fatalities alone do not portray these complexities.

Event counts can be one alternative to fatality counts. The relationship between conflict events and fatalities is not consistent. Some conflicts have relatively fewer events yet the number of reported fatalities are high, such as in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, others have many events yet yield lower reports of fatalities, such as in Ukraine, or in India where mob violence especially is active yet events often do not yield fatalities. This variation points to how fatality counts may be important, but they are not a determinative measure of violence.

ACLED analysis draws on a variety of different measures to understand conflict patterns. We use event types, locations of activity, changes in rates of violence and its volatility, new targets of violence and interactions, actor types and changes in modality of conflict, rates of conflict against the state and civilians, infighting amongst groups, etc. We encourage our users to take advantage of the full range of conflict metrics and patterns that can be discerned from the ACLED set.

What is the process for dealing with uncertainty and how does ACLED mitigate it, if possible? Can you just increase the number of sources in order to mitigate this uncertainty?

All sources have biases. Some biases are very apparent: propaganda, misinformation, and 'fake news' may have an obvious strong right or left political orientation. Other biases, however, may be less apparent. For example, international and national media may be biased towards reporting larger scale events, like highly lethal events. New media, such as Telegram channels or Twitter, tend to report more heavily in urban and heavily populated spaces. Well-researched reports tend to prioritize specific types of violence, like human rights violations, while leaving out events that are not corroborated. Local organizations rely on their established networks to report information, which may be limited to specific subnational spaces.

Simply increasing the number and types of sources will simply perpetuate these patterns. Hence, while it may seem intuitive that more reports lead to increased reliability, ACLED does not seek to simply increase the number of sources as a means to improve reliability. *The quantity of information does not*



ensure quality. In fact, more sources may lead to data of a lesser quality as inherent biases will be amplified.

To account for these various biases of sources, ACLED develops tailor-made sourcing processes per country and region. The goal is to generate particular source combinations that reflect the reality of disorder and fatality counts in each space. One strategy that ACLED has found to be especially fruitful is the prioritization of reports from local sources, such as local partners as well as subnational media. These sources mitigate the effects of more traditional, international, often English language media, which often sensationalizes the lethality of events for their audience. For more, see [this primer on ACLED's sourcing methodology](#).

Additionally, ACLED's oversight process means that data are continuously updated to reflect the most recent information. For example, if a bombing results in high casualties, ACLED will record the number of fatalities reported, but will amend this in future weeks if the death toll increases as reports arise of individuals succumbing to their injuries. In this way, ACLED is a 'living dataset'. This is different from datasets with an annual publication schedule in which events cannot be regularly updated to reflect the latest information.

Does ACLED have processes in place for quality control over fatality estimates?

ACLED takes a number of steps to ensure quality control of fatality estimates. This is to ensure that, while fatality estimates remain biased, that the estimates reported by ACLED are as reliable as possible. Internal source weighting is also helpful in increasing the reliability of fatality estimates. All sources have biases; these biases vary.

Regular consultations are one means of doing this. ACLED regularly commissions experts to provide feedback on data coverage for various countries/regions, sharing feedback on not only fatality counts but also other aspects of data collection (e.g. trends, actors, sourcing, etc.). In addition, partnerships with organizations that have expertise around specific contexts also ensures that trends in the data, including fatalities, are a fair and reliable representation of local dynamics.



ACLED Countries at War

ACLED defines a country as 'at war' if a single group or coalition is attempting to violently challenge the legitimacy and authority of the central government, and that same group is active in 20%+ of the state. This is a qualitative assessment made by ACLED; a list is shared below.

It is important to note what countries are at war, as it is in these contexts where reports of an unspecified number of fatalities may regularly be recorded as an estimate of 10. As discussed in the fatality methodology above, not all events within a country at war will be coded with an unspecified number of fatalities equal to 10. In these countries, violence involving other peripheral parties (e.g. communal groups) will not be coded with an unspecified number of fatalities equal to 10, and will instead be coded as 3; even violence yielding an unspecified number of fatalities that does indeed involve the conflict parties will not necessarily always be coded with an unspecified number of fatalities equal to 10 if the event is of a more limited scope.

Countries at war

Region	Country	Start of war period	End of war period
Middle East	Yemen	2015	<i>Ongoing</i>
	Syria	<i>Beginning of ACLED coverage for country (2017)</i>	<i>Ongoing</i>
	Iraq	<i>Beginning of ACLED coverage for country (2016)</i>	2017
Central Asia	Afghanistan	<i>Beginning of ACLED coverage for country (2017)</i>	<i>Ongoing</i>
Africa	Algeria	<i>Beginning of ACLED coverage for country (1997)</i>	2002
	Angola	<i>Beginning of ACLED coverage for country (1997)</i>	2002
	Burkina Faso	2019	<i>Ongoing</i>
	Burundi	<i>Beginning of ACLED</i>	2005



		<i>coverage for country (1997)</i>	
	Central African Republic	2012	2016
	Chad	1999	2003
		2006	2006
		2008	2008
	Democratic Republic of the Congo	<i>Beginning of ACLED coverage for country (1997)</i>	2003
	Djibouti	2008	2008
	Eritrea	1998	2000
		2008	2008
	Ethiopia	1998	2000
	Guinea-Bissau	<i>Beginning of ACLED coverage for country (1997)</i>	1999
	Ivory Coast	2002	2007
		2010	2011
	Liberia	1999	2003
	Libya	2011	<i>Ongoing</i>
	Mali	2012	<i>Ongoing</i>
	Republic of Congo	<i>Beginning of ACLED coverage for country (1997)</i>	1999



	Senegal	<i>Beginning of ACLED coverage for country (1997)</i>	2001
	Sierra Leone	<i>Beginning of ACLED coverage for country (1997)</i>	2002
	Somalia	<i>Beginning of ACLED coverage for country (1997)</i>	<i>Ongoing</i>
	South Sudan	2013	<i>Ongoing</i>
	Sudan	<i>Beginning of ACLED coverage for country (1997)</i>	2005

Meanwhile, there are a number of countries that, while not at war, experience significant violence in a specific subnational region or at the hands of a specific actor. So while unspecified number of fatalities in these countries are, on average, coded as 3 as these countries are not 'at war', violence within certain contexts in these countries tends to be significant enough to warrant coding unspecified number of fatalities as 10 in those specific contexts. These decisions are based on qualitative assessments by ACLED researchers -- one of the advantages to a researcher-based conflict data collection project relative to automated machine-based ones as researchers can make these type of assessments. Some of these contexts are noted below for reference:

Country	Context	Start of period	End of period
Cameroon	Violence involving Boko Haram	2014	<i>Ongoing</i>
	Violence involving Anglophone Separatists	2017	<i>Ongoing</i>
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Violence in the Ituri and Kivu regions	<i>Beginning of ACLED coverage for country (1997)</i>	<i>Ongoing</i>
Kenya	Violence involving Al Shabaab and along the border with Somalia	2009	<i>Ongoing</i>



Nigeria	Violence involving Boko Haram	2009	<i>Ongoing</i>
Saudi Arabia	Violence along the border with Yemen	2015	<i>Ongoing</i>
Sudan	Violence in Darfur	2003	<i>Ongoing</i>

Lastly, for clarification, there are a number of countries that are home to ongoing conflicts, though not at a scale in which the country would be categorized as 'at war' per ACLED's working definition. In these contexts, events with unspecified number of fatalities tend to be coded with unspecified number of fatalities equal to 3, unless there is reason to believe that the event was particularly significant/large. Some of these contexts are noted below for reference:

Country	Rationale
Azerbaijan & Armenia	<i>Conflict in these countries is locally-bound along the Azerbaijani/Armenian border, as well as along the internal border with the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (Republic of Artsakh)</i>
Iraq	<i>The most persistent threat of violence in Iraq post-2017 has been that involving the PKK, which is locally bound to the north</i>
Israel & Palestine	<i>Violence in the region is typically locally bound to the border area along the Gaza Strip and HaDarom</i>
Myanmar	<i>No single ethnic armed organization in the country is significantly present across the country; military alliances amongst them are also neither active nationwide nor are they secure/lasting, with alliance members only fighting together on rare occasion</i>
Pakistan	<i>Conflict in Pakistan was locally bound to the FATA region, and now to the border regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and in areas of Balochistan</i>
Philippines	<i>Conflict in the Philippines involving Islamist groups challenging the government is locally bound to the south, especially to the Mindanao region</i>
Thailand	<i>Ongoing conflict in Thailand involves Malay Muslim separatists and is locally bound to the south of the country</i>
Ukraine	<i>Ongoing conflict in Ukraine is locally bound to Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbass region</i>