

Is fraud corrupting research in the social sciences?

Kuria S, Welch V, Petkovic J, Maxwell L, Pardo Pardo J, Tugwell P



BACKGROUND

Problematic studies, including retracted publications, may undermine the reliability of systematic reviews and influence conclusions that inform policy and practice. While prior research has examined the impact of problematic studies in biomedical evidence synthesis, less is known about their impact in the social sciences.

This study examines how retractions are indexed across social science databases, assesses the coverage of retractions in the Retraction Watch database, and explores the prevalence of retracted studies in Campbell Collaboration reviews, and their implications for evidence synthesis.

METHODS

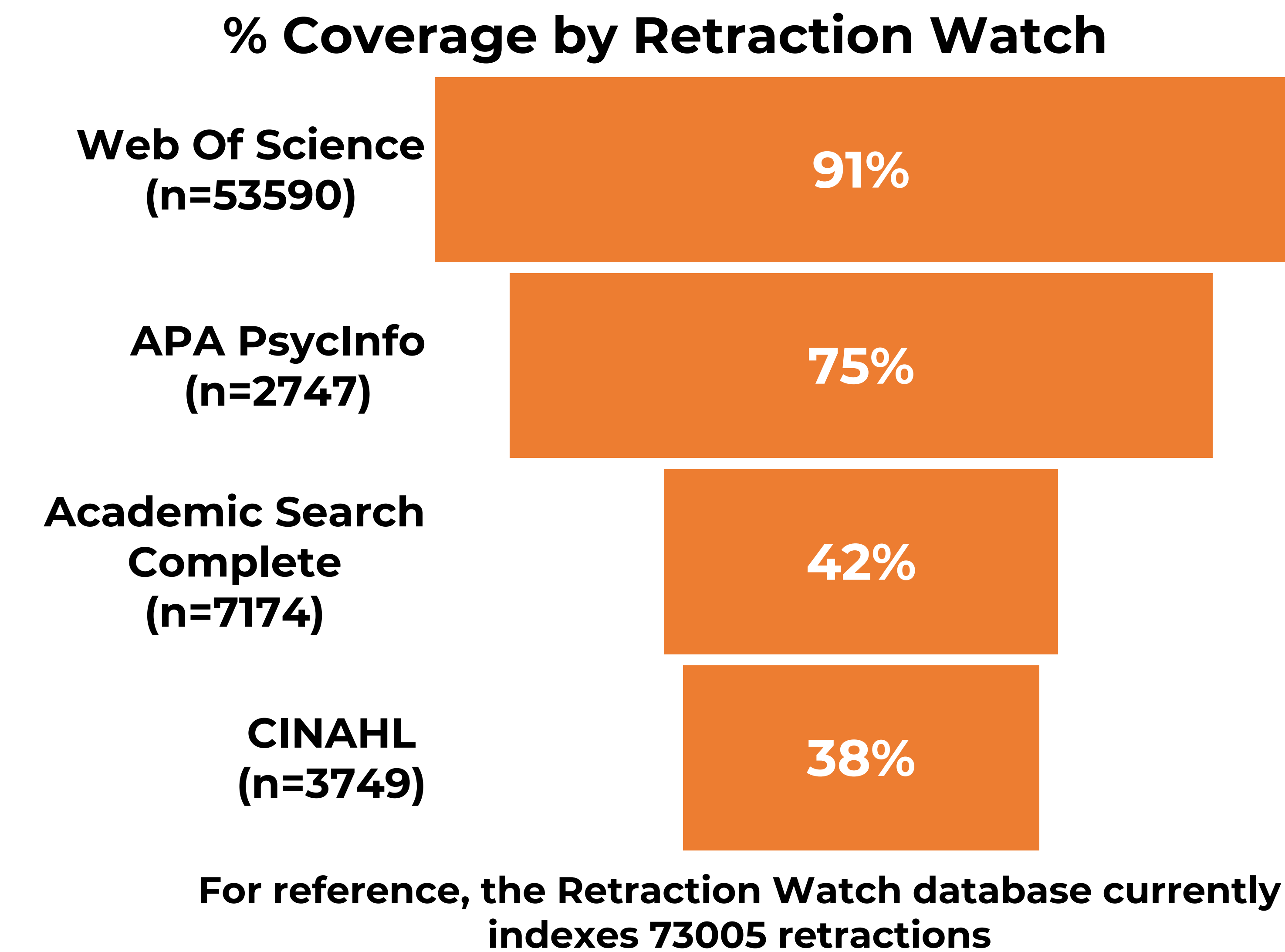
We examined retraction indexing in Academic Search Complete, APA PsycInfo, CINAHL, and Web of Science.

We developed optimized search strategies to identify retractions and cross-checked the resulting records against the Retraction Watch database using DOI and title matching.

We then searched 11,085 studies included in Campbell Collaboration reviews (up to March 2023) for retracted publications using Retraction Watch and database-specific retraction lists.

RESULTS

Retraction Watch alone misses up to 62% of database-indexed retractions.



3 retracted studies among 11,085 studies included in 279 Campbell reviews

All in the Campbell International Development group, and all present in the Retraction Watch database.

Which reviews included the 3 retractions and how do they impact evidence synthesis?

Review 1: Keats et al. 2021

Effects of vitamin and mineral supplementation during pregnancy on maternal, birth, child health and development outcomes in low- and middle-income countries: A systematic review

Included 72 articles and involved 439,649 women

- Asemi (2013) contributed 48 women
- Kumar (2009) contributed 524 women

Estimated Low Impact

Review 2: Psaki et al. 2022

Policies and interventions to remove gender-related barriers to girls' school participation and learning in low- and middle-income countries: A systematic review of the evidence.

Included 88 articles and investigates 18 gender-related barriers to schooling for girls in LMICs.

- Sukontamarn (2013) covers 1 barrier on the lack of adequate food on school enrolment.
- No formal meta-analysis so removing this paper is unlikely to change the conclusion for this outcome.

Estimated Low Impact

Conclusions and next steps

Retractions are inconsistently indexed across social science databases, with many not captured by Retraction Watch. These findings suggest that **multiple sources may be needed to identify all retracted studies** in evidence synthesis.

Three retracted studies were identified in Campbell reviews, and they appear to have had **minimal impact on the overall findings** of the assessed Campbell reviews. Ongoing work will assess additional databases.