

A139 Searching for the Unidentified in South Texas: The Forensic Border Coalition (FBC) Cemetery Survey Project

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the difficult task of locating burials of unidentified human remains along the South Texas border.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing methods for locating burials of unidentified human remains for identification purposes.

In 1995, Texas passed laws specifying explicit procedures for processing unidentified human remains found within a forensic context. In 2005, additional state laws concerning missing and unidentified persons were passed, based on new technological advances using federal databases and DNA to help identify missing and unidentified persons. Currently, many counties in Texas follow these state laws. Unidentified human remains that are part of a medicolegal investigation and are processed through a medical examiner's office have a final disposition that is carefully tracked; however, the majority of Texas counties do not have a medical examiner's office and human remains found in these counties have historically been less carefully tracked.

Prior to 2005, most unidentified human remains found in South Texas representing presumed migrant deaths were buried without identification efforts. In Texas, there is no centralized recordkeeping system to address how many unidentified human remains have been found and buried statewide or along the South Texas border. Knowing the number of unidentified remains likely to correspond to migrants would allow for a better understanding of the humanitarian crisis at the South Texas border and across the United States-Mexico border region. Further, knowing the number of deaths and burial locations would allow for strategic planning for exhumation, analyses, and identification efforts of the long-term dead.

In an effort to count the number of migrants who have died crossing the Texas/Mexico border, the FBC conducted a cemetery survey project to address the following questions: (1) How many migrants have died crossing the Texas/Mexico border per county per year?; (2) Where are they buried?; and, (3) What are the county protocols regarding unidentified deceased persons? The FBC employed several different methodologies, including searching county records, soliciting public information from funeral homes, cemeteries, law enforcement, and medicolegal agencies, and surveying cemeteries for unidentified burials. A total of seven counties were targeted based on their close proximity to the border and accounts from journalistic sources detailing high numbers of migrant deaths.

Based on a lack of county records, even with two counties having an indigent burial program, it is difficult to address the question of how many unidentified deaths have occurred per county per year for the past 20 years. Unidentified remains buried in counties without a medical examiner ($n=5$) or indigent burial service ($n=5$) had little-to-no records regarding the number of unidentified deaths or locations of burials. A total of 70 burials were located through pedestrian survey of cemeteries, and an additional 62 burials were located through conversations with medicolegal death investigators, funeral homes, and cemetery directors. Burials with associated information were mapped using the Global Positioning System (GPS). Through information obtained from funeral homes, additional potential burial sites were located; however, these potential burials are unmarked with no existing records. Each of the seven counties had different approaches to processing unidentified human remains and not all complied with Texas state laws. Only one county, with a medical examiner, tracked the exact burial location and associated case information.

Since the survey for these seven counties is now complete, strategically planned, funded exhumations will take

place. Further, collectively the FBC will work toward identification of the exhumed remains. It is crucial that local jurisdictions secure pathology and/or anthropology exams, submit DNA samples, and track the final disposition of unidentified human remains and all associated case information. Without tracking final disposition or associated case numbers, unidentified remains will be difficult to locate and identification may never take place.

Forensic Anthropology, Identification, Migrant Deaths