



Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

H52 Migrant Deaths Along the CaliforniaMexico Border: An Anthropological Perspective

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Through this presentation, the author intends to facilitate multidisciplinary information sharing and discussion among border jurisdictions. This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by bringing to the forensic community an awareness of some medicolegal issues unique to border jurisdictions.

Any discussion of illegal border crossing between the United States and Mexico is fraught with political and cultural issues, such as the need to enforce enacted laws, maintain security, and caretake human rights. People will continue to cross international borders in search of a better life. Some will be caught and repatriated, some will be successful, and some will die trying. They are betrayed by guides, beset by gangs, beaten, robbed, raped, packed in hot airless vans, hit by cars, drowned, and abandoned to the elements. These are the individuals who come to the attention of the medical examiner or coroner and forensic anthropologist. At this point, medicolegal issues supercede sociopolitical ones. The deaths need to be investigated, remains autopsied and identified, next of kin notified.

California shares a 150-mile border with Mexico. Along the border, remains are discovered by Border Patrol agents, hikers, offroaders, and other migrants. They are predominately male (88%, using 1997-2003 San Diego data). They range in age from 14 to 75 years, with most in their 20s. They come mainly from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Some are found soon after death, others are in various stages of decomposition, due in part to the ecological diversity of San Diego County. Prior to 1995, the principal cause of death was motor vehicle accidents, at the rate of 2 per day. This changed in 1995 when the California Department of Transportation built a barrier fence in the median of Interstate 5 south of the San Clemente checkpoint. Recently, the principal cause of death is exposure. Eastern San Diego County has a very "long thermometer" with extremes of daytime heat and nighttime cold.

Identification can be difficult. Medical or dental records are rarely available. There may be a voter's card or a bus ticket. Family members, often working through the Mexican consulate, identify clothing, new shoes, or distinctive belt buckles. Sometimes fellow migrants offer identification. Unfortunately, many of these bodies are still John or Jane Does. California's recent so-called "John Doe" law mandates that dental samples be retained at the medical examiner's office for these unidentified remains; further, in San Diego these bodies are buried, not cremated.

In the 1990s, the Border Patrol began a concerted effort to establish and maintain control of the border, beginning in urban areas. Operation Gatekeeper began in October 1994, reaching from the Pacific Ocean to halfway across San Diego County. This heightened law enforcement presence changed the westernmost segment of the border south of San Diego from the most permeable to the least permeable stretch of the border. This spatial restructuring pushed migrants into more dangerous crossing areas, making their trip longer and more physically challenging as they made their way on routes through the mountains and deserts and more rural areas. A 2001 study by the University of Houston Center for Immigration Research documents how intensified border campaigns are affecting migrant death patterns through this redirection of flow. They attempted to quantify data from San Diego to McAllen, Texas, the full extent of the border with Mexico, using vital registration data supplemented by interviews with Border Patrol agents, law enforcement officers, and coroner's personnel.

Their findings accurately reflect what we see in southern California. For example, deaths due to exposure in harsh environmental conditions in San Diego County range from a high of 36 in 1988 to a low of 5 in 1998. Conversely, Imperial County shows a low of 2 in 1996 and a high of 21 in 1998. Imperial County presents its own set of challenges to migrants. They have a choice of waterless desert or the swiftly flowing All-American Canal. Not surprisingly, drowning deaths have increased from a low of 3 in 1996 to a high of 24 in 1998 as migration routes shifted eastward.

The author's anthropological jurisdiction since fall of 1994 has been San Diego and Imperial Counties, and the effects of spatial restructuring are being played out in southern California. The case database is 124 from San Diego County and 71 from Imperial County, although the actual number of medical examiner migrant cases is higher. In San Diego these cases represent only about 2% of the annual medical examiner caseload, and Border Patrol personnel, based on their weekly live apprehension reports, estimate that the number of deceased migrants represents only about 1% of the total migrants who cross the southern California border. This may appear insignificant, but these cases still represent a very real forensic and human problem.

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