



Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

H56 Fatal Footsteps: The Murder of Undocumented Border Crossers in Maricopa County, Arizona

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about a new trend of killing undocumented workers in Arizona. The majority of deaths among this group are from dehydration and exposure while crossing the desert to seek work. However, some of these individuals are being held for ransom and then killed when the family is unable to pay. The additional burden this places on the medical examiner and law enforcement will be discussed.

The forensic community will be made aware of a disturbing change in the manner of death for undocumented workers crossing the border from Mexico into Arizona.

The mortality rate among undocumented workers in Arizona has increased seven fold in the past five years (Bureau of Customs and Border Protection, as quoted in The Arizona Republic). Border patrol agents in California and Texas have tightened control over their borders with Mexico thereby increasing the amount of traffic from Mexico into Arizona. In 1998-1999, the number of deaths among Arizona border crossers was 28. That number increased dramatically in 1999-2000 to 106. As of July 17, 2003, 104 crossers had died, indicating (albeit anecdotally) a further increase in mortality among this group. The number of deaths expressed as a percentage of persons apprehended has also increased during the same time period. In 1998, 5 individuals died for every 100,000 apprehended. Today, that number stands at 33.7 per 100,000.

In the past, most immigrant deaths occurred as a result of dehydration and exposure. More recently, a new trend has emerged, that is, death of border crossers at the hands of the persons hired to lead them across the border. These smugglers, known as “coyotes,” charge thousands of dollars for their services. In some cases, the smugglers attempt to extort additional money from the families of their victims by holding them hostage once they have crossed the border.

Eight deaths in Maricopa County during the months from January 2002 through March 2003, are reflective of this trend. The individuals were recovered from a remote location on the northwestern side of Maricopa County. Each was young to middle aged and became the victim of homicidal violence. The period since death in the cases ranges from very recent to months. Three of the eight remain unidentified. There are striking similarities in these deaths, including the location of recovery, the condition of the victims and the way in which they were killed. The consistencies are suggestive that the same group of suspects was involved in the use of this area, or at the least that a network of information was available about the remoteness of the site. The location was abandoned after the Sheriff of Maricopa County announced increased surveillance. No additional bodies have been recovered in the area since this announcement.

Three theories are currently at work in these cases. One suggests that the deaths are warnings from vigilante groups opposed to the undocumented workers crossing over from Mexico. There is no evidence to support this contention, however the investigating agency has not ruled it out. Drug trafficking was initially the prevailing theory, however evidence came to light that in some of the cases extortion was a more likely explanation.

Some *coyotes* have turned from drug trafficking to human smuggling in part because profits can be made and the penalties are far less severe. Rival smugglers hijack one another’s “cargo” and ransom the victim’s to their families. Alternatively, the original *coyote* holds the border crosser hostage until the family can provide more money. In either case, if the family cannot pay, the individual is killed.

This disturbing trend, as illustrated by the eight cases in this paper, places a different kind of burden on law enforcement and the medical examiner. The autopsies are more protracted while the investigation is more complicated and often leads back to the undocumented worker’s country of origin. Usually, the most complex part of the investigation in the more typical undocumented worker’s death is that of identification and notification of the next of kin. If those tasks are accomplished, the body is returned and the case is closed. In the case of homicide, identification of the decedent is only the first step towards resolution of the case. This paper will present the details of the eight homicides and discuss the change from death by dehydration to murder.

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