



D16 Databasing the Disappeared and Deceased: The Use of Internet Resources in Resolving Missing and Unidentified Persons Cases

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have an awareness of the various resources available on the World Wide Web that may be helpful in resolving missing and unidentified person cases. This presentation will provide attendees with information on how to implement and maintain websites that deal with missing and unidentified person cases and offer suggestions on how the function and efficacy of existing websites can be improved.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by evaluating the effectiveness of web-based resources in resolving cases of missing and unidentified persons.

When an individual goes missing or an unidentified body is found, many resources, both public and private, are available to assist in resolving the case. Apart from the traditional means for drawing attention to cases such as flyers and media coverage, it has become common for information on missing and unidentified persons to be provided on the World Wide Web. An Internet search for “missing persons” or “unidentified dead” will result in a long list of websites that are operated and contributed to by a wide variety of entities including state, county and local law enforcement agencies, state clearinghouses and departments of public safety, coroners, medical examiners, odontologists/forensic dentists, forensic anthropologists, nonprofit organizations, volunteers, and concerned citizens among others. For law enforcement and the public alike, the sheer number of websites available can make it difficult to know where to start an Internet search regarding a missing person’s whereabouts or unknown decedent’s identity.

These resources differ greatly in the type and extent of information they offer online. Websites for missing and unidentified persons information may choose to provide any number of details about each case and often include photos, physical descriptions, dates of birth and/or death, facial reconstructions or age progressions, information or photos of victim’s clothing, personal effects, jewelry, etc. The amount and quality of information provided span the spectrum, but websites that offer more detailed information may have greater success in resolving cases. Unfortunately, the benefits of such websites can be rendered less effective by design faults such as poor ease of navigation, or the employment of search functions that are not adequately broad. Inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the information posted can occur if there is no protocol for entering and following up on information, or if the information posted is not verified against other sources. Despite the large number of websites devoted to this issue, few seem to coordinate with each other or even with other organizations within their own counties or states.

For the families and friends of missing persons, online searches can offer a new outlet for hope when they feel all other efforts have been exhausted. Websites that supply information on missing and unidentified persons can also aid law enforcement by broadcasting case information to a wider audience, raising public awareness of missing individuals and unknown decedents. Improving the usability and effectiveness of web-based searches and databases for missing and unidentified persons information may lead to swifter justice for victims and closure for both families and law enforcement agencies.

The raw data and statistics provided in this presentation have been collected from the following sources: (1) interviews with family members and friends of missing persons that are currently still missing, or were once missing but are now confirmed deceased, (2) surveys completed by coroners, medical examiners, forensic anthropologists, odontologists/ forensic dentists, members of law enforcement, employees and volunteers of nonprofit organizations, state clearinghouses, departments of public safety and other professionals with experience in missing and unidentified persons cases, and (3) interviews with Webmasters and employees of websites that house information on missing and unidentified persons. This presentation will include a list of items that should be provided online that can be useful in solving such cases. Finally, it will indicate some of the most effective websites that assist in this effort.

Missing Person, Unidentified Person, Websites