



D3 Cars Gone Wild: Auto-Pedestrian Homicides in Harris County

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After attending this presentation, attendees will become familiar with the concept of pedestrian homicide by motor vehicle collision, and will gain insight into the various features of pedestrian fatalities.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by showing the importance of a thorough investigation into all pedestrian fatalities, even those that may initially seem accidental.

Pedestrian and non-motorized bicycle fatalities constituted 21.4% of all motor vehicle fatalities investigated at the Harris County Medical Examiner's Office over a one year period. The manner of death in the vast majority of these fatalities is classified as accidental in Harris County, including those in which the vehicle driver fails to stop and render aid, the so called "hit-and-run." While most motor vehicle accidents involving pedestrians are found to be genuinely accidental in nature, a small number are caused by a deliberate, volitional act with the purpose of harming or killing someone. Without a timely and thorough scene investigation and search for possible witnesses, these cases may be overlooked and/or misclassified.

Over a seven month period, four pedestrian fatalities at the Harris County Medical Examiner's Office were determined to be homicides. In two of the cases, the driver and the decedent were not known to each other, and the cases were initially thought to be accidents. In the remaining two cases, the driver and decedent were known to each other and the cases were initially investigated as potential homicides.

The first case was that of a 25-year-old man whose body was found on a roadside near a sewer drain at approximately 7 a.m. by a passerby. He was last known to be alive the night before by his wife, who reportedly spoke to him on his cell phone as he walked home from a night club. His injuries at autopsy were consistent with being struck by a vehicle, and his postmortem alcohol level was 0.21 g/dL. Houston Police Department investigators noticed a surveillance camera at a business parking lot across the street from which the decedent was found. Although no intentional act was initially suspected in this case, police investigators obtained the video which depicted a car deliberately waiting for the decedent to approach an intersection, and then speeding forward and striking the decedent. Two people were then seen exiting the car, walking up to and stopping near the decedent, then returning to the car and leaving the scene. Because the wallet that the decedent normally carried was missing, robbery was presumed to be the motive of this intentional hit-and-run.

The second case involved a 42-year-old woman who was witnessed to be struck by a black pick-up truck as it swerved off the road along which she was walking. The truck carried her on the hood for approximately 62 feet and failed to stop and render aid. Shortly thereafter, a similar hit-and-run incident involving a black pick-up truck occurred in the Houston area. Collaboration between the medical examiner and the police revealed that a single individual had perpetrated these crimes.

In the two cases involving decedents who were known to the perpetrators, the decedents were struck in the parking lots of night clubs. Both of these events were reported to occur following arguments between the decedents and perpetrators.

Additional features of these four cases as well as features of pedestrian hit-and-run fatalities presumed to be accidental encountered at the Harris County Medical Examiner's Office will be reviewed. Factors such as road type and condition, speed of the vehicle, location of the pedestrian (intersection vs. non-intersection), alcohol/drug levels, age of the persons involved, and the time of day will be discussed with regards to intentional and unintentional pedestrian fatalities.

Although rare, there are occurrences in which a motor vehicle is deliberately used as a weapon against another person. Without a complete and thorough investigation that begins promptly at the time the body is found, the ability to effectively classify the manner of death, as well as gain evidence for effective prosecution of hit-and-run pedestrian deaths, may be impaired.

Hit-and-Run, Pedestrian, Homicide