



Physical Anthropology Section – 2008

H126 Identity Crisis: The Number and Quality of Unidentified Decedent Data and a New Solution

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The goal of this presentation is to discuss the extent of the problem of unidentified human remains, how forensic anthropologists can play a key role, and a working solution. Missing persons and unidentified remains continue to be a staggering problem for law enforcement, medical examiners and coroners' offices, forensic scientists, and the public as a whole.

Approximately 14,000 unidentified human decedents are on record at nearly 2,000 medical examiners and coroners' offices, but the number of unidentified decedents that are without records are unknown. Recent statistics suggest that each year an additional 1,000 deceased persons remain unidentified and so the number of unidentified human remains continues to climb and persists as a significant and constant national problem. This presentation will impact the forensic science community by significantly increasing insight into the caliber of the problem of unidentified human remains and an understanding of both the existing efforts for identification and the future implications of forensic anthropology's contribution to these efforts.

Currently, the FBI's National Crime Information Center (NCIC) reports approximately 6,200 unidentified persons files in its database. The NCIC plays an important role in missing and unidentified persons cases, but its limitations many times hinder both the utility and success of the database, its search criteria, and its results. However, many times it is the quality of the data or the lack of forensic expertise that prevents the success of identification. The progress and advancements in the forensic science field as a whole has exceeded the capabilities of the NCIC. An in depth investigation into the quantity and quality of the data in the NCIC will be presented.

Traditionally, forensic anthropologists only examine skeletal remains and, while many unidentified cases are skeletal or in a state of advanced decomposition, forensic anthropologists have become increasingly utilized reviewed enabling us to learn how the identity was originally missed and as consultants for fleshed bodies as well. Whatever the circumstance, the ultimate goal for any forensic anthropologist is identification. As the popularity of forensic anthropology increases, so does the knowledge that the field exists and can make significant contributions to the problem of unidentified remains.

There are several resources available to law enforcement agencies, medical examiners and coroners' offices, and other forensic science experts including the NCIC, CODIS(mp), ViCAP, and IAFIS. An initial effort to address the overwhelming number of unidentified human remains was the utilization of DNA. The CODIS(mp) or National Missing Person DNA Database was created in 2000. At the Center for Human Identification (CHI) at the University of North Texas Health Science Center, DNA testing is being performed on skeletal remains, missing persons' families, and direct reference samples free of charge. Anthropological examinations on unidentified human remains are also performed there; all in an effort to identify the unknown.

The newest resource for unidentified remains is the Victims Information Catalog, Tracking, and IMaging System (VICTIMS) Identification Project. This system is Internet based and, for the first time, creates a comprehensive database with the capabilities to hold all of the information about an unidentified decedent. This information is available in varying degrees to law enforcement, medical examiners and coroners' offices, and the public. The success of this database lies in the hands of the forensic science experts who examine and provide information about an unidentified person. An extension of the VICTIMS Identification Project is a referral service where law enforcement agencies and medical examiners and coroners' offices seeking forensic expertise can search for local experts in a nearby area. The last aspect of the VICTIMS Identification Project is an Evidence Preservation and Processing (EPP) facility, which will enable the examination and preservation of physical remains of unidentified decedents, as well as support anthropological research.

Unidentified Human Remains, Forensic Anthropology, VICTIMS Identification Project