



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2010

### H57 New York City Unidentified Decedents From 1980 – 2008

*Benjamin J. Figura, MA\*, New York City Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, 520 First Avenue, New York, NY 10016*

The goal of this presentation is to provide attendees with a unique perspective on unidentified decedents in New York City including historical and demographic trends.

By presenting statistics relating to unidentified individuals in New York City for a period spanning nearly three decades, this presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing a better understanding of historical and demographic trends within this

population. The presentation of these trends can provide direction for future research in identification techniques and allow for comparison with other large metropolitan areas.

A recent report published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics puts the number of unidentified human remains in the United States at over 10,000 cases during the twenty five year period from 1980 – 2004 (Hughes 2007).<sup>1</sup> According to this study, the State of New York ranks second only to California in number of cases during this period with a total of 2,284. Because the majority of the cases in New York State are likely to originate in New York City, one can safely estimate that New York City accounts for nearly twenty five percent of all cases of unidentified individuals in the United States. The Forensic Anthropology Unit at the Office of Chief Medical Examiner in New York City (OCME-NYC) has recently begun an historical review of cases of unidentified individuals with the goal of collecting all relevant case data into a single location and disseminating that data to national databases such as NCIC and NamUs.

This presentation provides a current assessment of unidentified individuals in New York City from the period spanning 1980 – 2008. The data are analyzed for trends based on a variety of variables including estimated age and sex, and year, month, and location of death. The data are also presented in relation to relevant milestones such as the full-scale use of DNA identification techniques.

**Materials and Methods:** The data were collected from two sources: the current OCME-NYC case database system, which includes cases from 1998 thru the present, and the New York City Department of Health's (DOH) logbooks of death certificates for the years prior to 1998. The DOH logbooks were searched for cases listed as Unknown Male and Unknown Female. Other name combinations typically associated with unknown individuals were also searched including Jane and John Doe, Unknown Bones, Unknown Skeleton, Unknown Skull, and Unknown Torso. All case files were reviewed to ensure the individual was correctly listed as unidentified. Demographic information was recorded from the anthropology or autopsy reports when available. Reports were generally not available for cases obtained using the DOH logbooks. For these cases the demographic information was taken directly from the death certificates themselves. Sex was listed as Male, Female, or Unknown. Race was listed as White (including Hispanics), Black, Asian, or Unknown. Cases were grouped into three age categories based on the available age estimates: Infant (less than 1 year), Subadult (1 to 18 years), Adult (19-49 years), Elderly Adult (50 years or older), or Unknown.

**Results:** There are a total of 3065 long-term unidentified cases for New York City during the period of 1980 - 2008, occurring at an average rate of 1.6 per 1,000 deaths. Overall there has been a gradual decline in the number of unidentified cases annually to the current rate of approximately 0.5 per 1,000 deaths. Annual totals do show a high degree of variability in the late 1980's and early 1990's, with fluctuations of around 50% between 1991 and 1995. It is possible that this variability is a byproduct related to the timing of death certificate filings or other factors, but it does appear to correspond with similar fluctuations in the overall death rate for the city. Within the five boroughs of New York City, Manhattan has the most unidentified cases in total, and averages the most cases each year except 1998, 2002, and 2004 when they are surpassed by Brooklyn. Staten Island has the fewest with only 50 cases during the 30 year period.

The majority of cases are males (80%), with White males accounting for about 38% of all cases and 28% for Black males. This differs from the BJS report, which estimated Whites males to account of over 50% of unidentified cases nationwide. Females account for 20% of the sample with nearly equal distribution between White and Black (6% of cases). 35% of the sample is estimated to be in the Elderly Adult category and 60% are estimated as Adult. 3% are estimated as Subadult.

Historical reviews such as this study are important because they allow for continued focus on cases of unidentified decedents that may have otherwise been forgotten about. The accurate accounting of these cases in the long-term is of vital importance to ensure that correct case data can be distributed to national databases (e.g NCIC and NamUs) and that potential matches with missing persons are not missed. In New York City, this historical review process has led to recent identifications in a number of long-term missing persons cases. The collection of this data also allows for comparison with other large jurisdictions.

#### Reference:

<sup>1</sup> Hughes, K. – 2007 Unidentified Human Remains in the United States, 1980-2004, edited by U. S. D. o.



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**Unidentified Decedents, New York City, Missing Persons**