



## Physical Anthropology Section - 2014

### H112 Undocumented Border-Crosser Deaths Recorded by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner From 1990 to 2013: Leading Causes of Death and Demographic Characteristics of Decedents

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After attending this presentation, attendees will gain an understanding of how changes in border enforcement policies contributed to increased Unauthorized Border-Crosser (UBC) deaths in southern Arizona in the early 2000s — an increase that has not waned over the past several years despite a decrease in unauthorized migration flows in the area.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by emphasizing the importance of systematically collecting valid and reliable data on estimated migrant deaths along the United States-Mexico border.

Between 1990 and 2013, the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) has examined the remains of 2,338 UBCs—over 95% of which have been examined since 2000. The increase in migrant deaths in southern Arizona has coincided with increased border control efforts in the region during the mid-to-late 1990s. This is especially notable considering that recently passed Senate Bill 744 includes border enforcement measures that likely will directly contribute to even more migrant deaths along the United States-Mexico border.<sup>1-3</sup> Because many of these migrants are currently unidentified, since 2000 the PCOME has examined suspected UBCs and created a “cultural profile” among these decedents to distinguish foreign nationals in transit from US residents.<sup>4,5</sup> Rather than deter would-be migrants, border enforcement efforts have rerouted migration flows into more remote areas along the border, including southern Arizona, and most recently, South Texas. This assertion appears to be supported by data collected by the PCOME. Over 45% of confirmed UBC deaths have been due to exposure or probable exposure, followed by undetermined cause of death (36%), motor vehicle accident (9%), other miscellaneous causes (6%), and homicide (4%).<sup>6</sup> A multivariate analysis using these data also confirms that specific causes of death tend to vary according to UBCs demographic characteristics. Another focus of the presentation will be to familiarize people with the demographic profile of UBCs and discuss how this profile has changed over time. Generally speaking, the typical UBC examined by the PCOME can be described as a male near the age of 30 from central or southern Mexico who died of exposure while attempting to avoid detection by U.S. authorities. However, there have been important changes in the UBC profile over the past several years. Today, UBCs are slightly less likely to be female, slightly older, and more likely to be from Central America than a decade ago. For instance, between 2006 and 2013 approximately 17% of UBC decedents were from a country other than Mexico, compared to only 9% between 2000 and 2005. Counts of UBCs examined by PCOME during 2013 to date are on pace to meet or exceed counts over the past several fiscal years. It is probable that the border enforcement surge outlined in recent legislation will increase UBC deaths along the southern United States border, especially as the demand for immigrant labor increases with the recovery of the United States economy. This, coupled with what appears to be a changing demographic profile of UBCs, will undoubtedly pose many new challenges for jurisdictions along the border that historically have not had to contend with the issue of migrant deaths. It is important for professionals in jurisdictions experiencing an increase in caseloads of UBCs to have a working knowledge of the factors that contribute to unauthorized migration flow.

#### References:

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continued humanitarian crisis at the border: Undocumented border crosser deaths recorded by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, 1990-2012. Tucson: Binational Migration Institute, Mexican American Studies Department, University of Arizona, 2013.

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### **Border Enforcement, Migrant Biological Profiles, Causes of Death**