



## Physical Anthropology Section - 2014

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### **H113 The Missing Migrant Project: Forensic and Cultural Anthropological Expertise Combined**

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have an understanding of the complex set of factors which lead to the lack of missing persons data in the United States-Mexico border context, and how the Missing Migrant Project can provide assistance with such investigations. In addition, attendees will gain a deeper appreciation of how forensic anthropologists and cultural anthropologists can collaborate productively in contexts where there are high numbers of missing and unidentified individuals.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by introducing the Missing Migrant Project (MMP), which assists forensic anthropologists and others in the identification of suspected Mexican or Central American migrants dying within United States jurisdictions.

The MMP was founded in 2006 at the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) to support that office in its investigation of the deaths of hundreds of border crossers each year. There are specific challenges to human identification in this context, both on the physical side and on the social side. Found in remote desert areas, often highly decomposed or skeletonized, and often without identification media, deceased Undocumented Border Crossers (UBCs) are physically difficult to identify. On the social side, there are hundreds of families in search of the missing from over five countries who are limited in their search by issues relating to national jurisdiction, poverty, and fear. Although hundreds of UBCs are dying on United States soil, complex factors at play in this massive transnational migration northward mark the border forensic context as distinct from everyday medicolegal practice in the United States.

The MMP was created to collect, manage, and share missing migrant reports among medicolegal agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and foreign consulates, and then to compare such reports to biological profiles of unidentified remains recovered in the desert areas of southern Arizona. Undertaken collaboratively between a forensic and a cultural anthropologist, the MMP approaches the UBC crisis anthropologically, leveraging a broader set of tools in a setting where many social factors directly affect the medicolegal context. Such collaborations are common in international forensic investigations, but are rare in the domestic setting. The success of the MMP in communicating with both families and forensic scientists, facilitating dozens of identifications, provides strong evidence that collaborations of this kind are useful in the domestic medicolegal context.

The MMP database currently contains records for over 1,500 missing migrants, with an increasing number last seen alive in border states other than Arizona. In 2012, the MMP and the PCOME were granted permission to enter missing person reports for foreign nationals into National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), allowing automatic comparison against unidentified remains. The MMP has established working relationships with law enforcement agencies, foreign consulates, and humanitarian groups along the border and is growing with increased funding, staff, and resources. The MMP will take missing migrant reports from any agency, organization, or individual STET will engage with the family and others to collect the highest quality of information, and then enter all data into NamUs.

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### **Forensic Anthropology, Cultural Anthropology, Undocumented Migrants**