



## Physical Anthropology Section - 2014

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### H121 Identification of Deceased Undocumented Immigrants Along the Texas Border

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the increasing crisis regarding border crosser fatalities in the state of Texas as well as the complexities and current efforts in the identification of these undocumented immigrants.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by documenting forensic science lacuna in the Texas border region and the achievements in building a border consortium of forensic scientists to ensure unidentified remains are properly reported, analyzed, and included in state and national databases. The purpose of this presentation is to provide as an example of the findings regarding the circumstances and disposition of 98 cases of unidentified immigrants recovered from Brooks County, Texas, and the coalition of scientists currently analyzing these cases.

There are an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States. The majority of these individuals entered along the U.S.-Mexico border. The United States has strengthened enforcement of immigration laws by adding personnel and technology in areas of high activity. The "prevention through deterrence" initiative aimed to increase the possibility of apprehension for illegal entrants enough to create an environment of unacceptable risk. This has resulted in a 78% drop in the total number of apprehensions since 2000. In addition, it has moved the major areas of illegal immigration from urban centers to remote areas of inhospitable terrain. Unfortunately, despite the reduction in apprehensions, the number of border deaths is increasing due to this change in migration routes. In 2000 there were 2.3 deaths per 10,000 people who were apprehended crossing the border that has increased to 16 deaths per 10,000 in 2012. This represents an almost 600% increase and should clearly be considered a humanitarian crisis.

In Texas, undocumented immigrant fatalities increased 127% in the Rio Grande Border Sector between 2011 and 2012. The majority of these cases occurred in Brooks County where there were 64 cases in 2011 and 130 cases in 2012. Brooks County is 944 square miles and has roughly 7,200 residents so it is a vast area with a small population. The county predominately consists of very large ranches. The Sheriff's Department has five officers and there are four Justices of the Peace (JPs) that attend to the deaths in the county. One hundred and thirty immigrant deaths last year are equivalent to a prolonged mass disaster for this county. Brooks County does not have a medical examiner or any resident forensic scientists. Given the small number of officers and JPs and no forensic personnel, most of these cases have not had autopsies, DNA sampling, or been included in missing person databases. When a body is not identified, the individual is buried in the Falfurrias Sacred Heart Burial Park. Last fall, Baylor University's Reuniting Families Project (RFP) began discussions with Brooks County officials to provide forensic assistance in the identification and repatriation of these individuals.

RFP began receiving the skeletal remains of undocumented immigrants in March 2013 and began grave exhumations in May with a forensic team from the University of Indianapolis. Field estimation indicated there were 63 individuals exhumed; however, that number has increased during laboratory analysis due to the discovery of body bags containing multiple individuals and some comingling. In addition, personnel from Baylor University make frequent trips to Brooks County to take possession of unburied unidentified remains. The goals of this effort are to provide anthropological analysis, DNA sampling, and database entry for the purpose of identification. As of July 2013, 98 cases have been recovered and are in various stages of analyses. Forty-three cases were transported to Texas State University where they are processed, anthropologically analyzed, DNA sampled, and material goods photographed. In addition, the University of Indianapolis (n=12) and Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command Central Identification Laboratory (JPAC-CIL) (n=23) have taken cases for anthropological analyses and DNA sampling. The remaining cases are being analyzed at Baylor. All case information, forensic analyses and photographs are submitted to National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) and the DNA results entered into Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) by the University of North Texas. Any unidentified remains will be housed at Baylor University and the cases will remain open and active utilizing any new technological breakthroughs that may become available. The exhumation efforts will continue until all unidentified remains are analyzed and fatalities cease. Unfortunately, the death toll for 2013 is similar to that of 2012.

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#### Undocumented Immigrants, Border Deaths, Exhumations