



Anthropology Section - 2015

A132 Interpersonal Violence in Undocumented Border Crossers From Southern Arizona Between 2006 and 2013

*Cate E. Bird, PhD**, Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences, 1885 Old Spanish Trail, Houston, TX 77054; and *Angela Soler, PhD*, Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command CIL CONUS Annex, 106 Peacekeeper Drive, Ste 2N3, Offutt AFB, NE 68113

After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding of interpersonal violence in Undocumented Border Crossers (UBCs) who died as a result of homicide in southern Arizona between 2006 and 2013.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by evaluating peri-mortem trauma, biological variables, and contextual information at an assemblage level in this human rights sample.

While migration across the United States-Mexico border has decreased over the past five years, deaths of UBCs have actually increased. This increase is largely due to the redistribution of migrants along the border resulting from United States immigration control policies, which funnel migrants into less protected, yet more remote and dangerous areas of the border. The Tucson Sector represents one of the most traversed corridors of the border region in the United States. UBCs who die in southern Arizona are examined at the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) in Tucson, AZ. As such, the PCOME currently handles the greatest number of migrant deaths in the United States.

In order to evaluate patterns of interpersonal violence in UBCs recovered in southern Arizona, biological variables, peri-mortem trauma, and contextual information from crime scenes were collected using investigator reports, autopsy reports, and forensic anthropological examinations. While the majority of UBC deaths between 2006 and 2013 were deemed accidental (42%) or undetermined (48%), approximately 3% represented homicides. In this study, all available homicide cases (n=37) from the PCOME during this period were reviewed, and included both identified and unidentified decedents. The sex and age of decedents were recorded, as were their associated decompositional stage, percentage of body recovered, and degree of trauma. Variables related to peri-mortem trauma were analyzed when possible and included the mechanism of trauma, anatomical location of trauma, and direction of force. Contextual information related to the crime scenes was also evaluated, including recovery site, disposition of the body, recovery cohort, presence of concealment tactics, and material evidence.

Preliminary results indicate that all UBC homicide victims from 2006 to 2013 were male. Decedents' ages were verified and estimated, and ranged from the mid-teens to 57 years at death. Approximately 46% of decedents were classified as young adults (20-35 years), while 38% were middle adults (35-50 years). Approximately half of all decedents exhibited multiple mechanisms of trauma; however, not all mechanisms were related to the cause of death as determined by the pathologist. Gunshot wounds were observed on approximately 84% of decedents, with fewer cases of blunt force trauma (38%), sharp force trauma (5%), and undetermined trauma (19%). Individuals exhibiting projectile trauma were shot between one and four times, with single gunshot wounds (55%) being the most common. Evaluation of contextual information related to the crime scene indicates that the majority of decedents were discovered alone (79%), on the ground surface (81%), and in the open desert (86%) in Pima, Pinal, and Santa Cruz Counties. Attempts to conceal victims' remains by perpetrators were observed in approximately 60% of homicide cases.

Employing a population-based approach, this study reports on patterns of interpersonal violence in hopes of recognizing one of many challenges encountered by this vulnerable population. In general, the majority of UBC deaths in southern Arizona are not violent in nature but rather accidental and related to the harsh environmental conditions of crossing arid and isolated terrain.¹ The low levels of homicidal violence amongst UBCs within the Tucson Sector stand in sharp contrast to reports of large-scale atrocities perpetrated against undocumented migrants traveling through Mexico and Central America.² Evaluation of peri-mortem trauma and the crime scenes from UBC homicides in this study suggests isolated incidents of interpersonal violence against individuals rather than the large-scale, systematic targeting of migrants occurring south of the border. Future research intends to examine the frequency and nature of violence in undocumented migrants from other areas (e.g., northern Arizona, California, and Texas) in order to determine how interpersonal violence varies by border region within the United States.



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References:

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 2. Dudley S. Transnational crime in Mexico and Central America: its evolution and role in international migration. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2012.
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