



Anthropology Section - 2016

A126 The Status of Unidentified Decedent Cold Cases at the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences (HCIFS) From 1957 to 2015

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding of how forensic anthropologists have significantly contributed to identifying unknown decedents at the HCIFS.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by reviewing overall patterns of unidentified cold cases, highlighting the challenges of medicolegal identifications, and summarizing the role forensic anthropologists have played in successfully identifying decedents in the medical examiner setting.

The Forensic Anthropology Division (FAD) at HCIFS has actively pursued the identification of unknown decedents in the greater Houston area since 2006. Currently, the FAD maintains records on approximately 340 provenienced unidentified human remains dating from 1957 to 2015. The majority of the decedents are from the 1980s (35%) and the 1990s (29%), with the number of unidentified cases decreasing steadily to the present. Approximately 78% of the decedents are male and 21% are female, with Whites (37%) and Hispanics (29%) being the most common ancestral groups represented. The manner of death in the majority of the cold cases is either undetermined (43%) or homicide (32%). While 40% of the unidentified decedents have fingerprints available, only 27% of the cases have faces appropriate to disseminate to the public. One of the primary problems with identification of unknown decedents is body condition at discovery. More than two-thirds of the HCIFS cold case remains were decomposing or skeletal at autopsy, which hinders identification because many individualizing characteristics (e.g., facial recognition, fingerprints, etc.) are lost when soft tissue features disappear. A further complication of identification efforts is that even when decedents were not decomposing, traumatic injuries often precluded the possibility of visual identification. In order to increase the likelihood of identifications, the FAD publishes other recognizable attributes of decedents, such as tattoos, personal effects, jewelry, clothing, distinctive fingernails, or dental restorations.

Forensic anthropologists have played a key role in recognizing, organizing, and publicizing unidentified decedent cold cases at HCIFS. Primary responsibilities undertaken by the FAD include reviewing all available records, resubmitting fingerprints to appropriate databases, updating decedent profiles (e.g., National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), National Crime Information Center (NCIC), and National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)), performing anthropological analyses, and collecting DNA for analysis and upload to Combined DNA Index System (CODIS). Over the past 10 years, the FAD has received two National Institute of Justice (NIJ) grants, funded two postdoctoral forensic anthropology Fellows, and exhumed the remains of 46 unidentified decedents for the purposes of identification. Due to the concerted efforts of forensic anthropologists at HCIFS, approximately 54% of the unidentified decedent cold cases have DNA submitted or uploaded to CODIS, and all available fingerprint cards have been digitized and resubmitted to appropriate agencies within the past four years. Also, in the last decade, 84 decedents whose cases date back to 1971 have been identified, primarily through fingerprint resubmissions (51%) or DNA matches (36%).

This presentation highlights the demographic trends among the unidentified cold case decedents from Harris County and surrounding areas during the last 50 years. It also illustrates challenges encountered during this endeavor and the significant role forensic anthropologists can play in organizing and resolving unidentified decedent cases in a medicolegal setting.

Unidentified Decedents, Personal Identification, Cold Cases