



A140 The Forensic Border Coalition (FBC): Collaborations in Forensic Sciences, Human Rights, and Public Policy

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand: (1) the multiple barriers to identifying and repatriating the remains of migrant border crossers; (2) the benefits of collaboration between forensic scientists, human rights organizations, cultural anthropologists, geographers, and others to address these barriers; and, (3) the need for changes in public policy to improve outcomes.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by introducing the FBC and its strategies to count the number of migrants who have died or disappeared crossing the United States-Mexico border, to locate burials of unidentified remains, to identify the dead, and to improve practices and protocols for future identifications of the dead.

The mission of the FBC is to support families of missing migrants searching for their loved ones and to address myriad barriers related to the identification of human remains found near the United States-Mexico border. The FBC formed in the summer of 2013 following the high number of border deaths in 2012. According to official data from the United States Customs and Border Patrol, the number of border deaths reached 471 in 2012. The coalition is comprised of forensic scientists and other scholars together with human rights activists to comprehensively address the significant barriers to identifying the remains of border crossers. This presentation will focus on the work of the FBC in Texas to provide one example of the benefits of collaborations.

Border deaths in Texas occur in more than 20 counties at or near the U.S.-Mexico border, some of which are among the poorest counties in the nation. The majority of these counties lack medical examiners or forensic pathologists, some have failed to collect DNA on unidentified remains as required by state law, and many cases of unidentified remains fail to be entered into databases such as the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) that allow them to be compared against missing persons reports. Because many remains are severely decomposed or skeletonized, family reference samples are often required to make identifications via DNA. Some family members of migrant border crossers reside outside the United States (primarily in Mexico and Central America) and others are undocumented individuals who hesitate to visit law enforcement offices to file a missing persons report. In either case, families may be prevented from presenting missing persons reports or from entering their family reference sample into the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS).

Even locating the site of burials of unidentified remains in many South Texas counties is difficult due to lack



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of standardized recordkeeping, the lack of coordination between county officials, the large number of burials sites and funeral homes that process remains, the failure to clearly label unidentified remains in many cemeteries, and the failure of cemeteries to keep and share records.

In order to address barriers related to locating and identifying human remains, the FBC relied on the methodology of requesting and analyzing public records regarding migrant deaths and unidentified remains and accessing death certificates and indigent burial records to locate the final disposition of the death. In addition, the FBC collaborated with Missing in Harris County Day so migrant families could safely present cases and submit family reference samples, resulting in a number of identifications.

Non-governmental organizations and other FBC collaborators have been key in making recommendations and meeting with policymakers to improve protocols to identify, locate, and repatriate the dead in both Texas and Arizona. The multidisciplinary nature of these collaborations is instrumental in exposing the gaps within these protocols and thus in making them a powerful humanitarian voice for pushing forward policy change at the local, state, national, and international levels.

Migrant Deaths, Human Rights, Policy Reform