



E35 National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) Database Reconciliation: “No Body” Murder Trials and Missing Persons

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand: (1) NamUs, its benefits, and shortcomings; (2) “No Body” murder trials; and, (3) the challenges in solving missing persons and unidentified decedent cases.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating a useful tool in an under-researched area and the investigation of missing and unidentified persons. Specifically, this presentation will provide the results of reconciling victims from “No Body” murder trials with the missing persons database.

There are more than 100,000 active missing persons cases on any given day, and more than 40,000 unidentified remains at medical examine/coroner offices throughout the country.¹ This number of unidentified remains will only continue to increase, as approximately 25% of the unidentified cases handled in medical examiner/coroner offices will remain such after one year.²

After a few years of strategizing and identifying challenges and tools available to investigate and solve missing persons and unidentified human decedent cases, NamUs was created. NamUs is a web-based database which can be used to “search cases in the missing persons database against cases in the unidentified decedents database in an effort to identify unidentified human remains and solve missing persons cases.”³

NamUs is a repository of information on missing persons and unidentified remains and, also offers free DNA testing and anthropology and odontology information for cases across the country. The system automatically cross-matches comparisons for similarities when a new missing person or unidentified decedent case is entered and has aided in closing 12.19% of the missing persons cases entered and 33.14% of the unidentified decedent cases entered.⁴

As in any tool, this database is only as good as the information entered into the fields. There are many situations that preclude cases from being entered into NamUs (for instance, a person never reported missing by loved ones). Another such situation was found in “No Body” murder trials, which are trials for murder that occurred without a body ever being found. Since a perpetrator was tried for the murder and the victim was deceased in the eyes of the law, it was assumed that many of these cases were not entered into NamUs as missing persons. Therefore, should their remains be found, identification would be complicated at best.

Of the 444 “No Body” murder trials in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands that occurred through June 2015, there were 464 victims.⁵ Approximately 5% of the victims’ bodies were since found and identified and approximately 38% of the victims were listed as missing in the NamUs missing persons database, however, slightly more than 57% of the victims were not listed in the missing persons database. This demonstrates



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a gaping hole in information available to aid investigators working to identify decedents; if the decedents are not listed as missing in the database, they will not be ruled in or out, nor will any DNA or other potential information be collected from family for potential identification.

The purpose of this presentation is to inform the forensic science community of the findings of the reconciliation of these “No Body” murder trial victims and the NamUs missing person database with the goal of increasing awareness of the system and ultimately improving outcomes for solving missing person and unidentified decedent cases. The study highlights a great tool, but also demonstrates how important the role of law enforcement officials, medical examiners and coroners, forensic scientists, attorneys, key policymakers, and victim advocates and families is in being diligent in using NamUs for missing person and unidentified decedent cases.

Reference(s):

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4. National Missing and Unidentified Person System. Missing Persons Database. Available from: <https://www.findthemissing.org/en> (Accessed July 31, 2016).
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Missing Persons, Unidentified Decedent, NamUs