



A93 The Approach Toward Identification of Deceased Migrants in the United States and European Union: A Comparative Study Between LABANOF (Italy), OpID (Texas) and PCOME (Arizona) Experiences

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have acquired an overview of the complex topic of identifying migrants who either die in the United States or the European Union, with special emphasis on the differences and similarities existing in the projects currently conducted in Arizona, Texas, and Italy.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating the importance of applying forensic anthropology to the emerging field of humanitarian sciences, which has become increasingly important in recent years and whose potential has yet to be fully recognized in other geographical regions and contexts in the world.

Due to the rise in migrant deaths in Europe, and the continuing crisis of migrant deaths in the United States, an assessment comparing and contrasting the approach of forensic anthropology in these humanitarian crises was conducted. The materials and methods for this research derive from an extensive period of participant observation, namely three years at the Laboratory of Forensic Anthropology and Odontology (LABANOF) in Italy working on the identification of migrants who have perished in the Mediterranean and three months in the United States embedded with anthropologists working at Operation Identification (OpID) at the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State University and the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) in Arizona. Data was derived from systematic surveys of organizational and staffing structures, laboratory protocols and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), casework records, and experiences regarding the identification of migrant remains.

Results indicate there are many similarities regarding difficulties in the identification of deceased migrants around the world. The remoteness of migrant deaths often creates challenges in finding or recovering remains, with deaths in Arizona and Texas occurring in desolate, arid lands, while in the Mediterranean, deaths are often the result of a ship sinking and taking hundreds of lives with it at once. Often in the United States and European Union, migrant remains are not found with identification cards or visas that could provide an immediate identification hypothesis. Furthermore, the absence of missing persons reports and/or antemortem data is a universal difficulty.

Similarities and dissimilarities were also found in the way the three different organizations operate within their respective jurisdictions to attempt migrant identifications. Due to the high levels of deaths in Arizona for years, the PCOME is a state-funded agency with two full-time forensic anthropologists to help address the identification of unidentified skeletal remains. Since 2001, their agency has received 2,615 remains of presumed migrants and has helped facilitate the positive identification of 1,676 individuals. As part of a governmental agency, the PCOME also has a staff of death investigators who operate as case managers.

In contrast, the experiences of academic-based LABANOF and OpID have been largely volunteer-based, with OpID gaining a small paid staff only in recent years. This is, in part, due to the higher number of dead in these areas within the past five years, but also to the fragmented nature of migrant death investigations in Texas and the European Union, resulting in a smaller number of remains received by these organizations. Since its inception in 2013, OpID has received 238 sets of unidentified remains and has helped facilitate the positive identification of 24 individuals, while LABANOF has received approximately 1,000 remains/postmortem data coming from three different shipwrecks and has helped facilitate the positive identification of 21 individuals who died in the October 3, 2013, shipwreck that occurred in Lampedusa. The academic-based operations of LABANOF and OpID also lack a staff of death investigators, and therefore anthropologists have taken on the important role of case managers.

Within the United States, there are national databases, such as the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) and the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS), that offer a central repository for case information across jurisdictions, which are utilized by both the PCOME and OpID; however, in the European Union, there are no similar databases, resulting in a more fragmented system than in the United States.

In spite of their unique challenges, anthropologists in all three jurisdictions have implemented strategies and protocols for working with local, regional, and international members of law enforcement and non-governmental organizations to achieve identifications and move cases forward, though approaches differ based on locally available resources and legislative barriers; however, a general model of anthropological involvement has proven successful across the United States and European Union, and could be successfully implemented in other arenas of humanitarian need across the world.

Human Rights, Migrant Identification, Forensic Anthropology