



A116 Undocumented Border Crossers (UBCs) By Sea: Investigating the Eastern Border Crisis

Amanda N. Friend, MA*, C.A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory, Gainesville, FL 32608

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will appreciate the complexity of the Eastern border within the medicolegal context, the difficulty in applying previously successful methodology, and how this relates to the border crisis in the Southwestern United States.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by assessing the challenges posed by the UBCs of the Eastern United States border for forensic anthropologists and the medicolegal field at large.

From 1998 to 2017, the United States Border Patrol (USBP) has reported a total of 6,745 deaths of UBCs in the Southwest sectors.¹ As many who work in these sectors have noted, this is likely a gross underrepresentation.^{2,3} Even less represented are decedents from the Eastern border as deaths are not tracked or reported from the USBP for the Coastal sectors including the Miami Sector. The Miami Sector is the focus of this presentation as it is demonstrably the largest point of undocumented immigration attempts.⁴ This has resulted in a large knowledge gap in the understanding of the complete human rights implications occurring in the United States border regions.

Unlike the Arizona or Texas border sectors, there are no known isolated regions where deceased UBCs are found or buried in the Miami Sector. As a result, there is no clear population with which to make comparisons between the Southwest and Coastal border sectors. This lack of geographic separation between UBCs and other forensic populations potentially causes difficulties in even identifying an unknown decedent as a UBC prior to identification. Compounding this is the large number of migrants that were granted legal status in the United States due to previous immigration exceptions, such as the Haitian refugee status or the “wet foot, dry foot” policy for Cubans that are likely to also comprise a large portion of Miami Sector UBCs.⁴ This then creates a lack of morphological distance between the local forensic and the UBC populations.

One successful method for identifying potential UBCs in a Medical Examiner Office (MEO) setting has been developed in the Southwest by Anderson working at the Pima County MEO in the Tucson Border Sector.⁵ This method involved the creation of a UBC profile to screen unidentified decedents that went through the Pima County MEO. To construct an artificial Miami Sector UBC population and qualitatively assess the methodology of screening for UBCs from a forensic population, this study constructed an expected Miami Sector UBC profile. The constructed profile included biological, geographical, and possible expected associated artifacts based on the UBC and Florida migration literature. This profile was then used to screen cases from the four southernmost MEO districts that had been processed at the University of Florida C.A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory (CAPHIL) since the beginning of casework in 1972 to 2018.

The screening resulted in a minimum of 20 cases flagged as potential UBCs. This small sample is likely due to several methodological problems that create difficulty in applying successful approaches in the Southwest to the Miami Sector. Lack of associated documentation in reports on artifacts recovered with the remains or clear documentation of recovery context could have resulted in exclusion of UBCs. Limitations within typical forensic anthropological analyses may have excluded possible UBCs due to lack of informative elements or lack of appropriate reference populations for ancestry analyses (i.e., Caribbean samples), resulting in a failure to meet the criteria set out in the constructed Miami Sector UBC profile. Furthermore, the terrain that UBCs traverse to enter the United States via the Miami Sector is a large body of water, which likely makes recovery highly unlikely. A further potential reason for this screening process returning a limited number of potential UBCs is that potential (or confirmed) UBCs may have been exclusively recovered and evaluated at the MEOs and thus were never sent to the CAPHIL for analysis. Conversely, the required broadness of the ancestry component of the Miami Sector UBC profile may have resulted in non-UBC individuals erroneously flagged as potential UBCs. The results of this analysis demonstrate the complexity of the challenge faced by forensic anthropologists and MEO personnel investigating forensic cases, including UBCs in the Miami Sector, and how these challenges are different than those working on border crisis in the Southwest.

Reference(s):

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