



A36 Assessing the Role of Churches in Missing Migrant Identifications

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the role of churches in preventing migrant deaths and in assisting in missing migrant identification.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by highlighting the interests and contributions of churches as stakeholders in mitigating the missing migrant crisis in some of the deadliest counties along the United States-Mexico border.

Militarization of the United States-Mexico border in recent years has pushed an increasing number of undocumented migrants from crossing at urban centers to using more remote and dangerous areas, particularly in Texas. The result is an increase in deaths, robbery, extortion, rape, and human trafficking. Every year, hundreds of unidentified human remains are discovered in private, remote ranches in South Texas. For many years, the lack of resources and willpower to provide autopsies and investigations into migrants' deaths means that many were buried hastily, without DNA collection or documentation of burial sites.

Churches historically have assisted migrants during their journeys: providing them food, clothing, and refuge; connecting them with legal services; offering advice on how to best continue to their destination; addressing their spiritual needs and those of affected families; and facilitating burials. In South Texas, Christian churches have an active presence on the United States-Mexico border, particularly the Catholic, United Methodist, and Evangelical denominations. To date, the role of these faith-based communities in working with migrant families is not clearly delineated or understood among policymakers and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). To gather some insight into the perspectives of church leaders on the missing migrant crisis and investigations in Texas, a survey was conducted of a sampling of South Texas-area churches. The purpose of this study was to: (1) gauge the attitudes of Christian church leaders and their congregations toward migrant issues; (2) document their roles in assisting undocumented migrants; and (3) discover potential unidentified remains burial sites.

The area of South Texas includes eight counties (Brooks, Cameron, Hidalgo, Jim Hogg, Kenedy, Starr, Willacy, and Zapata), encompassing 438 churches (both Catholic and Protestant) identified by this study as operating within this region. A database of churches was compiled from churchfinder.com, Google® maps, and each Christian denomination's online directory, and a custom map reflecting this database was created. Using this database, a strategy was designed to gather data from a representative sampling of these churches. This strategy enabled deep questioning from a broad swath of church types. The study assessed parking lot areas to differentiate large and small congregations, sampled Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and Evangelical Protestant churches, and selected for churches in rural and urban areas. This approach enabled the study to parse discrete differences among congregations and regions along the border. The survey questionnaire included questions to assess each church's demographics, cemetery services, social outreach, perspectives (on immigration and other socio-political issues), and theological leanings. These data will inform future studies to gather in-depth data among the various congregations.

The study was approved by Duke University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to proceed, yet additional permissions were requested from leaders in certain churches, denominations, and regions. Some of the requests conflicted with IRB confidentiality requirements, while others required months-long approval processes from denominational leadership. This limited the ability to assess certain groups. These challenges in gaining permissions are important to acknowledge for future studies, but also to recognize the potential barriers to cooperation for migrant death investigations.

In preliminary analysis of the participants' results, the study has found that approximately one-third of the sampled churches have been approached for help in finding missing migrants. Most churches have reported being involved with undocumented migrants, with ~80% indicating that it was important to provide outreach to undocumented migrants. Approximately one-fourth of the sampled churches had hosted a funeral for an unidentified person or a memorial for a missing migrant. The results also indicated a potential difference in perspectives among the parishioners in comparison to church leaders on key issues on immigration (such as extending authority of the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement to local/regional law enforcement).

These results suggest that Christian churches in South Texas act as mechanisms for American communities to interact with and support migrants in need. Their utility should be considered in any future inter-agency efforts to investigate migrant deaths.

Missing Migrants, Stakeholders, Churches