



A153 Standardizing the Use of Grave Markers for Unidentified Migrant Remains in South Texas Cemeteries

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding of the inconsistent use of grave markers for unidentified migrant remains in South Texas and how the standardized use of grave markers could greatly assist the recovery and identification of remains.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by promoting best practices for tracking unidentified remains in South Texas cemeteries that will improve future exhumation and investigative efforts and ensure compliance with state laws.

The migrant death toll at the United States-Mexico border is a mass disaster, with the highest numbers of deaths currently in Texas. According to United States Customs and Border Patrol statistics, more than 4,000 people have perished trying to cross the border in Texas since 1998, with more than 1,500 of these deaths occurring since 2012. While the Texas Criminal Code of Procedure (TCCP) mandates that all unidentified remains be investigated, sampled for DNA, and tracked for a minimum of ten years, the degree to which South Texas counties are compliant is inconsistent. Because local authorities often lack the funding or personnel to carry out swift, thorough investigations, the vast majority of unidentified migrants recovered in South Texas are buried in local cemeteries without having been forensically examined or sampled. The way these individuals are buried, including the extent to which their graves and case information are documented, can greatly impact the preservation of evidence and the ability to re-locate burials for future identification.

Exhumation efforts by Operation Identification (OpID) at Texas State University seek to recover the remains of unidentified migrants in order to facilitate identification and repatriation. Having conducted pedestrian survey and large-scale exhumations in partnership with the Forensic Border Coalition across multiple counties in South Texas, OpID has encountered many challenges when locating unidentified migrant burials. Besides incomplete and missing burial records, most graves are unmarked or have markers that are temporary, flimsy, and/or lacking valuable case information. Most burials exhumed by OpID have instead had to be located by other means, such as informant memory recall, Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) survey, and exploratory excavation, all of which are time- and resource-consuming. Remains that are recovered with grave markers that have dates, locations, funeral homes, or case numbers listed have a much better chance of being identified than those that are buried unmarked.

The present study seeks to examine the use of grave markers related to unidentified migrant remains in three South Texas counties in order to assess the consistency and effectiveness with which grave markers assist investigative efforts in the region. It is the overall goal of the present study to promote the standardized use of permanent grave markers that contain relevant case information that can be easily located and tracked over time.

Grave marker data were collected for all unidentified migrant burials that have been exhumed to date by OpID over the course of four exhumation seasons across three South Texas cemeteries from 2017 through 2019. Grave markers were assessed in each cemetery in terms of their material, legibility, and content of case information. Of the 94 burials exhumed by OpID, only 24 (25.53%) contained grave markers, with only 20 containing case-related information (21.28%). The most common case information listed on grave markers was funeral homes ($N=11$), followed by dates ($N=9$), and death record numbers ($N=8$). While grave markers were found to be present in all three cemeteries, differences in the use of metal or plastic and paper markers and in the types of information they contained were found between the cemeteries. Thus far, three of the four individuals who have been positively identified from these recent exhumation seasons were buried with a grave marker (75%).

It is the position of this presentation that grave markers should become standard practice for unidentified migrant burials in South Texas. Especially in counties that lack access to medical examiners or forensic practitioners, utilizing grave markers is an immediate and relatively inexpensive solution that will greatly aid in the ability to recover and identify remains in the future. Promoting the widespread use of permanent grave markers will also ensure county compliance with state laws regarding the handling of unidentified human remains.

Migrant Death, Exhumation, Identification