



A86 Assembling a Forensics of Structural Violence

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will recognize ways that forensic science can contribute to making structural violence visible and responding to it, along with some of the challenges that are likely to accompany those efforts.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by identifying specific areas where the ethics and the organizational practice of forensic investigation must adapt to address structural violence.

Beginning with efforts to locate clandestine graves and identify victims of enforced disappearance in Argentina in the 1980s, scientific experts and families of the missing have created a new global paradigm for forensic investigation that is sometimes called “forensic humanitarian action,” a blend of 19th- and 20th-century ideas of humanitarianism and human rights.^{1,2} This presentation argues for complimenting the field’s focus on war crimes, genocides, and “natural” disasters with an integrated, 21st-century understanding of structural violence.

Structural violence refers to the differences in people’s well-being or “life chances” that result from “the unequal distribution of power and resources.”^{3,4} It is violence that is “built into the structure of society itself.”⁵ Critics argue that the human rights movement has long focused too narrowly on direct violence while turning away from the everyday structural violence experienced by the global poor.⁶⁻⁸

For forensic scientists, responding to this critique would require moving beyond the traditional definition of “wrongful death”—a claim against a specific perpetrator—to a focus on *preventable* deaths and the living communities impacted by them.⁹ Preventable deaths result from disease, poor labor conditions, mass migration, environmental destruction, and the global failure to deter climate change and the unequal distribution of its effects. In many cases, these deaths produce bodies that go missing or wind up in marginalized burial places, their stories never told.

Experts working to identify migrants who die in the United States-Mexico borderlands have called for a forensics of structural violence, and explored its ramifications for the role of individual experts.^{9,10} This presentation builds on their work through an interdisciplinary approach combining social anthropology, political theory, and historical perspectives. It further assembles a picture of the forensics of structural violence, as well as ethical and political dilemmas that accompany its necessary development.

A focus on structural violence includes asking what care for the dead—and the chronic disruption of this care—means for the health and well-being of entire communities. It also means questioning what types of historical violence merit forensic investigation: wars and massacres only, or also the forgotten graves produced through generations of exclusion and structural violence?

The forensics of structural violence spark difficult conversations about neutrality and objectivity, and who is present and heard in the spaces where forensic humanitarian organizations chart their directions. These organizations will also need new fundraising solutions to emerge from a humanitarian tradition where “savage inequalities,” though claiming lives every day and disrupting the care of the dead, do not command the same attention as direct violence.¹¹

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