



A87 Beyond Identification: Structural Vulnerability and the Investigation of Migrant Deaths

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about structural vulnerabilities affecting undocumented migrants crossing the United States-Mexico border and living in the United States, and how these vulnerabilities impact migrant deaths and death investigations.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by: (1) highlighting the unique perspective and skills of forensic anthropologists that can bring awareness to this continuing humanitarian crisis; and (2) initiating a discussion of the ethical responsibilities of forensic anthropologists working with vulnerable migrant populations.

Nationally, people of color, migrants, transients, and homeless persons are overrepresented in forensic casework, especially in cases of long-term unidentified decedents.¹ Both at the southern border and nationally, undocumented migrants represent a substantial number of these long-term unidentified decedents. However, people of color, and especially undocumented migrants, are immensely underrepresented in local missing persons reports and cases uploaded to national databases. This disparity will intensify as migrants continue to die in large numbers at our southern border and disproportionately within our local communities. As an integral part of the death investigation process, forensic anthropologists are challenged with the identification and repatriation of undocumented individuals, and as a result, we as a discipline are directly and intimately witnessing this humanitarian crisis.

With widely applicable skills in academic, medical examiner/coroner, government, and human rights contexts, forensic anthropologists are in a position that few other forensic practitioners share. Whether attempting to identify unknown remains, contributing skeletal information to the cause and manner of death, or conducting research that will assist in these analyses, we inevitably come into contact with the physical bodies of vulnerable individuals. Many forensic anthropologists also come into contact with distressed and vulnerable families as we communicate with loved ones for the purposes of identification and repatriation. Regardless of the jurisdiction or context in which we work, or the type of analyses in which we participate, as forensic anthropologists we should be aware of the structural vulnerabilities affecting the physical bodies we examine and the families we serve.

This presentation will review structural vulnerabilities in undocumented migrant groups using the three forensic temporal perspectives of trauma as an analytical framework: (1) Antemortem: biological indicators of poverty and physical violence experienced in life and incorporated into the body; (2) Peri-mortem: indicators of structural vulnerability that correlate with the recovery location of deceased migrants and the cause and manner of their deaths; and (3) Postmortem: indicators of structural vulnerability in the unequal treatment of migrant bodies, including incomplete forensic investigation of their deaths, and the burdensome position of family members with a loved one who died while undocumented. These issues will be discussed as they pertain to ethical considerations in research and when handling the remains of vulnerable individuals.

Incorporating knowledge of structural vulnerabilities in undocumented migrants into a forensic context is meaningful for a number of reasons. First, recognizing biological indicators of poverty and physical trauma as additional scientific data can substantially contribute to identification efforts. Additionally, comprehending the stressors affecting families of missing and deceased undocumented migrants may help investigators develop strategies to identify their loved ones and make notification. Undocumented individuals and their families are essentially living “invisibly” in our society and forensic practitioners need to account for this in any efforts to make an identification and when communicating with family members. Some investigative strategies and resources to work through the identification of a probable undocumented migrant will also be presented.

Finally, and most important, there is an ethical responsibility that we must consider in our multidisciplinary role as forensic scientists and anthropologists. Practicing forensic science is to serve the deceased, their families, and ultimately the greater community. As forensic anthropologists, we are deeply involved in various stages of the death investigation process and are in a unique position to share our scientific knowledge and experiences of how this crisis is affecting the greater migrant community. Our service, our research, and our outreach can not only contribute directly to the death investigation process, but also to an awareness of the larger humanitarian crisis that we are witnessing.

The views and opinions expressed in this abstract are the author’s own and do not reflect the opinions of the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner or the City of New York.

Reference(s):

1. Kimmeler E.H., Falsetti A., and A.H. Ross. 2010. Immigrants, undocumented workers, runaways, transients, and the homeless: Towards contextual identification among unidentified decedents. *Forensic Sci Policy & Manage Int J* 1(4):178-186.

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