



## A91 Counting the Uncountable: Certification of Deaths in the Borderlands

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**Learning Overview:** After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for certifying disaster-related deaths and how the application of these guidelines allows for a better accounting of deaths occurring during irregular migration.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating how increased interjurisdictional consistency in investigating and certifying deaths can better inform public health and public safety initiatives related to irregular migration.

During the process of death investigation, Medical Examiners/Coroners (ME/C) routinely collect and report information that may be used for public health surveillance. Death certificate data is used to develop public health and public safety initiatives and inform citizens about patterns and trends in population health. Death certificate data from mass fatality events is used to assess the scope of an event, understand mortality patterns, and evaluate short- and long-term public health impacts. Inconsistencies in certifying a death as disaster-related make it difficult to generate reliable and accurate mortality statistics and to identify the most frequent causes of death associated with disaster events.<sup>1</sup>

Worldwide, it is estimated that, from 2000 to 2019, more than 60,000 people have died during the process of irregular migration. An estimated 6,000 to 7,000 of these migrants have died in the United States as a result of crossing the United States -Mexico border, a death toll similar to Hurricanes Maria and Katrina combined.<sup>2</sup> While alarming, these numbers are minimum estimates only; due to the nature of irregular migration, many of these deaths occur in clandestine fashion and an unknown number of deaths are unreported or undiscovered each year. Moreover, these numbers are a tally only of deaths and disappearances during the process of crossing the physical border and do not reflect persons dying as a result of irregular migration but not in the act of crossing the border (for example, those dying in immigration detention facilities or in hospitals while in the custody of federal law enforcement).

Different government entities and non-governmental organizations may have different methods for counting migrant deaths. There is some evidence that federal data may vary widely from local- and state-level data, hampering policymakers and researchers. Even at the state or local level, ME/C inconsistencies in investigating, certifying, and tracking these deaths make it difficult to accurately count them in a given jurisdiction, much less place deaths occurring at a certain locality within the larger context of irregular migration. Because many of these deaths will fall within the statutory authority of medical examiners and coroners, ME/C data, if comprehensive, can provide the best information about migrant deaths in a given time or place. One way to improve data collection is to standardize the certification of these deaths.

The CDC has published guidelines for the certification of deaths directly and indirectly related to a disaster, whether that disaster is natural, human-induced, or chemical/radiological. This presentation will provide an overview of these guidelines and discuss how they may be adapted to the certification of deaths related to irregular migration. Although the true number of migrant deaths may be impossible to ascertain, better characterization of the known deaths can diminish the magnitude of underreporting of these deaths and allow for improved understanding of the scope of this public health crisis.

### Reference(s):

- <sup>1.</sup> *A Reference Guide for Certification of Deaths in the Event of a Natural, Human-induced, or Chemical/Radiological Disaster.* (<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvss/vsrg/vsrg01.pdf>).
- <sup>2.</sup> The International Organization of Migration (IOM)'s Missing Migrants Project Migration Data Portal (<https://www.migrationdataportal.com/themes/migrant-deaths-and-disappearances>).

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### Disaster Mortality, Irregular Migration, Migrant Death