A86 Stakeholder Forums: Applying a Social Science Strategy for Recognizing Policy Consensus Among Divergent Stakeholders on Transnational DNA Data Sharing in Missing Persons Identifications

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will have learned of a novel process for evaluating policy options among stakeholders using social science research strategies.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by informing attendees on the challenges, priorities, and potential solutions for DNA data sharing to enable identification of missing persons across national borders.

In United States border states, human remains appearing to be migrants take months or years to identify and are sometimes buried without collecting biometrics for identification. Governmental and non-governmental efforts to improve recovery efforts, identification processes, communication, and repatriation processes are ongoing. DNA-based identification strategies across borders relies upon the sharing of: (1) Family Reference Sample (FRS) DNA data, and (2) Unidentified Human Remains (UHR) DNA data. However, DNA data sharing is complicated by questions of sovereignty, privacy, consent, and national security. Both the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) and non-CODIS missing persons databases are under-populated and disconnected, resulting in missed opportunities for identifications. Several efforts have emerged to improve missing migrant identifications, yet disagreements and miscommunications among stakeholders have slowed progress. Multiple efforts to convene stakeholders to resolve some of the DNA-based challenges have resulted in incremental improvements in processes and increased awareness; however, many challenges persist. This study sought to develop a research strategy focused on the use of DNA data for identifications to systematically assess: (1) the challenges stakeholders face; (2) any varying stakeholder priorities; (3) potential agreement on solutions; and (4) gaps in data necessary to devise policy. Two Stakeholder Forums were held—each modeled as a cross between a focus group and a community forum—to capture quantitative and qualitative perspective data from stakeholders. The composition of the two Forums was designed to maximize consensus and trust and to minimize conflict within each.

The two in-person Stakeholder Forums were held with 26 representative stakeholders selected from qualifying professionals from 15 groups: local law enforcement, federal law enforcement, intergovernmental law enforcement, Justices of the Peace, medical examiners and coroners, consulates, intergovernmental organizations, humanitarian organizations, migrant family advocates, anthropological investigators, DNA forensic laboratories, federal database stewards, DNA technology laboratories, governmental officials, and human rights attorneys. A total of one to four participant representatives from each of 13 of the 15 groups (excepting governmental officials and human rights attorneys) were successfully enrolled. The semi-structured Forums were preceded by an information session where one representative from each stakeholder group presented challenges and perspectives from their vantage. Participants completed a demographic and pre-Forum questionnaire prior to each two-hour Forum, which were both closed to the public and recorded under an Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol. Attendees used pseudonyms during the Forum. Audience response devices collected data during each Forum to supplement the pre-Forum questionnaire. One written qualitative question was asked during each Forum. Conversations were transcribed and coded for themes, subthemes, challenges, actionable policy suggestions, and positive and negative statements. Cross-referencing enabled the illumination of commonalities between the two Forums. In total, 79 challenges and 36 solutions were identified and sorted comprising eight categories: UHR recovery/processing; education on processes; infrastructure and policies; FRS collection/processing; DNA data sharing; long turnaround times; communication; and funding. While 21 of these challenges were raised in both Forums (e.g., long turnaround times to obtain matches), only one solution arose in both Forums (i.e., hire more laboratory technicians). The pre-Forum and in-Forum questionnaires reflected some consensus including: (1) a majority of participants agreeing that UHR should be uploaded to CODIS and could also go to a non-CODIS laboratory; (2) support for training of non-law enforcement personnel as FRS collectors; and (3) general support for rapid DNA in some aspect of identifications.

At times, mission differences (e.g., national security vs. humanitarian) result in disagreements in policy matters and priorities. Often, personalities and misunderstandings fuel the discourse, preventing progress in tackling the challenges. In recent years, observing the policy challenges in improving DNA-based identifications for transnational missing persons, strong emotional agreement has been observed among all stakeholders that the challenges ought to be addressed, and yet there has been no meaningful action to correct the policy gaps. It is hoped that systematic analysis of empirical data from a wide variety of stakeholders will aid in the construction of a long-term policy scaffold to manage the priorities in addressing the many obstacles.

DNA Identification, Policy, Social Science

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