Forensic Identification of Deceased International Migrants at the US/Mexico Border

Lori E. Baker
ReunitingFamilies.org
• Locate and recover remains
• Determine demographics
• Trauma information to determine cause and manner
• Postmortem interval
• Positive identification
Sex Estimation
Age Estimation

Lori E. Baker, Ph.D.
Reuniting Families Project
THE HUMAN JOURNEY

NORTH AMERICA
15,000 years ago
QUEENS (New York City)

SOUTHERN EUROPE
20,000 years ago

WEST AFRICA
70,000 years ago

SIBERIA
30,000 years ago

CENTRAL ASIA

NORTHERN EUROPE
30,000 years ago

EAST ASIA

SOUTHEAST ASIA
50,000 years ago

MIDDLE EAST

SOUTH ASIA
200,000 years ago

SOUTH AMERICA
15,000-12,000 years ago

AUSTRALIA
50,000 years ago

25,000-15,000 years ago

http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/big-idea/02/queens-genes
INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS DAY
18 December 2016

7,189 MIGRANT DEATHS IN 2016

#Together #ForMigration

http://www.iom.int/news/migrant-deaths-worldwide-top-7100-over-half-mediterranean
U.S. / Mexico Border

1,933 Mile Border

1,241 Miles In Texas (64%)
Prevention Through Deterrence

Initiatives to close the border at major cities

- 1993  Operation Hold the Line in El Paso, TX
- 1994  Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego, CA
- 1995  Operation Safeguard in Tucson, AZ
- 2001  Operation Rio Grande in TX

Goals:
- Add resources along the border
- Strengthen enforcement of laws
- Close major corridors of unauthorized immigration
Spending Increased 242%
Apprehensions Decreased 250%

Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection www.cbp.gov
Redirected migration to desolate areas

By John Moore – Getty Images
Spatial distribution of migrant deaths

By Wayne A. Cornelius University of California, San Diego
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>6,915 Deceased International Migrants “Documented” US/Mexico Border

Unidentified migrant remains, Pima County morgue. Credit: Mizue Aizeki.
692% Increase in Risk of Death From 1998 to 2013

Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection www.cbp.gov
6,895 Deaths Recorded by BP from 1998 to 2016

Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection www.cbp.gov
El tren de la muerte ("The Death Train")
La Bestia ("The Beast")
El tren de los desconocidos ("The train of the unknowns")
Yearly 400,000 to 500,000 migrants
Why the Reuniting Families Project Was Necessary

• Undocumented border crossers (UBC) carry little identification and sometimes false identification
• Forensic analysis was not being performed for UBC cases
• Families had no way to find answers
Texas utilizes 2 types of death investigation systems:

**Medical Examiner System**

&

**Justice of the Peace System**

14 of the 254 Texas counties have a Medical Examiner’s Office

**Eligibility requirements**

- a citizen of the United States;
- at least 18 years of age
- a resident continuously in Texas for 12 months, having presided in the precinct for six months
- no felony convictions
- mentally competent
Reuniting Families Project

- Aid in the identification and repatriation of deceased international migrants
  - Exhumations of pauper graves, search for remains
  - Create a biological profile from skeletal remains
  - Trauma, pathology, dental analyses
  - Enter into case National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs – NIJ)
  - Submit DNA samples for analysis and upload into Combined DNA Index Systems (CODIS – FBI)
  - Work with foreign governments to match unidentified remains to missing persons cases
  - Develop new methods for human identification
Brooks County
UBC Deaths

2009 – 72
2010 – 22
2011 – 64
2012 – 130
2013 – 87

- Two Border Checkpoints
- No Forensic Scientists
- No Federal Funding

Unidentified individuals are buried in Sacred Heart Cemetery
• No map of cemetery with location of each grave
• No list of individuals interred each year
• No documentation of the graves of the unidentified
168 bodies from Brooks County 2013-2015

January 2017
24 more bodies exhumed

~ # of passengers of an airplane

No idea how many unidentified remains still buried
Restore Human Dignity
Commingled burials

Unidentified individuals from other counties

Severe lack of resources
Lack of information on available resources
Lack of training
Lack of knowledge of the law
King Ranch sprawls across **825,000** acres of South Texas
An area larger than the state of Rhode Island
Estimated that only 25% of UBC remains recovered
>6,500 International Migrant Remains Recovered US/Mexico Border
CASE 0391

Assumed sex: Male
Assumed age: 25 to 57
Date found: 06/02/2012
County: Brooks
Sheriff report ID: 12-06-02-792
NamUs #: 12661

Notes:

CONTACT INFO
Juveniles Apprehended
2014 - 79,577
2016 - 102,105 (59% unaccompanied)
El Salvador is not 103 homicides per 100,000 people.
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