

A143 Missing Migrant Data Managed by the Forensic Border Coalition (FBC)

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the current state of the data regarding missing migrants managed by members of the FBC as well as strategies in data comparison and the latest figures on the minimum number of missing migrant cases in the United States-Mexico border area.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by highlighting the unique challenges in collecting and sharing data about missing migrants along the United States-Mexico border and by providing a methodology for the collaborative management of such data as developed by the FBC.

The transnational nature of migration in the Americas poses unique challenges to the tracing of missing persons. Migrants may pass through multiple countries or states before reaching their final destination, facing extreme vulnerability at all points during their journey. Migrants are dying and disappearing at alarming rates throughout Mexico as well as along the United States-Mexico border. Relatives of the missing may live in Central American countries, Mexico, or the United States and reach out to a variety of governmental and non-governmental organizations in their search for information. These organizations in turn may or may not have access to comprehensive and accurate data about unidentified human remains discovered along migrant routes. The United States has a public, non-genetic, national database, the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), that is intended to centralize information regarding missing persons and unidentified remains, as well as a separate DNA-index system, the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS), operating at local, national, and state levels that has the potential to facilitate genetic comparisons; however, families of missing migrants face significant obstacles to participation in either system for a variety of reasons, particularly when family members reside outside of the United States and/or are living in the United States without official documentation. The consequence is that data regarding missing migrants is scattered throughout the Americas, with both duplication of efforts between organizations and inconsistency of responsiveness to relatives. In turn, experts trying to identify the dead struggle to obtain antemortem information about missing migrants that is accurate, organized, and complete.

Three non-governmental organizations within the FBC manage missing migrant data: (1) the Argentine forensic anthropology team, Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (EAAF); (2) the Colibrí Center for Human Rights; and, (3) the South Texas Human Rights Center (STHRC). Each organization differs slightly in geographical focus, with EAAF covering regions throughout Central America, Mexico, and the United States, Colibrí encompassing the entire United States-Mexico border, and STHRC focusing on those who disappear crossing into Texas. Despite these differences in geographical focus, there is overlap between these organizations' databases.

To compile a complete and non-overlapping list of missing migrant reports, cases were compared based on name, age, country of origin, and last known whereabouts. Common cases (appearing in two or more databases) were counted only once, and the organization with the most complete data was assigned the status of main point of contact, with the other organization(s) serving as secondary contacts. Between the three organizations, there is a total of 3,332 missing migrant cases, 929 of which are managed by EAAF, 2,118 by Colibrí, and 285 by STHRC. Matching cases is a crucial component in the prevention of duplicating efforts as well as clarifying who is responsible for a case, thus ensuring that all the necessary documentation, from antemortem to postmortem data, reaches the proper organization.

Obtaining reliable and comprehensive information regarding minimum numbers of migrants likely to have gone missing in the United States-Mexico border region has traditionally been a challenge. The FBC has addressed this need through case data collection and case data comparison processes that respect the unique needs of each organization's mandate while still facilitating large-scale comparison of case data to determine minimum numbers. These numbers represent the first comprehensive effort to obtain an estimate of those who have disappeared crossing the United States-Mexico border.

