Identifying Undocumented Border Crossers from the Texas/Mexico Border: A Collaborative Effort

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Introduction

The Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State (FACTS), in collaboration with other universities, human rights organizations, and government offices, is facilitating identifications of migrant remains from the Texas/Mexico border. This presentation will 1) highlight the role FACTS faculty and students play in this humanitarian crisis, 2) emphasize the methodologies used to process, clean analyze and identify undocumented border crossers (UBCs), and 3) describe the mentoring of future forensic anthropological practitioners through this collaborative project. This project at FACTS and the role our labs play in the identification process has come to be known as Operation Identification, or OpID.

Background

Brooks County, Texas (FIGURE 1) receives a high number of UBC deaths each year (80 in 2011, 129 in 2012, and 87 in 2013) (FIGURE 2), and these deaths fall under the jurisdiction of a Justice of the Peace (JP), as there is no medical examiner within the county. Due to this dramatic increase in deaths and lack of resources, the local JP and Brooks County Sheriff’s Office were overwhelmed with deaths and began to bury the UBCs; most without proper analyses or collection of DNA samples, leaving little chance for UBC identification and repatriation. During the summers of 2012 and 2013, Drs. Lori Baker (Baylor University) and Krista Latham (University of Indianapolis) and their students performed voluntary exhumations of UBC burials within Brooks County for the purposes of skeletal analysis and DNA sampling in hopes of facilitating positive identifications.

UBC Intake Procedures

The majority of the Brooks County exhumations contained individuals in early to late stages of decomposition, requiring a storage area or location for further decomposition until the maceration could be accommodated. Because FACTS has large scale storage and maceration capabilities due to the Forensic Anthropology Research Facility (FARF) and the Osteological Research and Processing Laboratory (ORPL), UBCs with significant amounts of flesh (47 in 2013 and 30 in 2014) were brought to FACTS to await maceration and analysis. Once in FACTS custody, all UBCs are taken to FARF and placed in a special enclosure within the facility (FIGURE 3). The UBCs are not used in any decomposition or taphonomic studies at FARF. During placement of UBCs at FARF, faculty and staff conduct intake procedures that involve opening the body bags and documenting the condition of remains and personal effects. At this time, personal effects are removed (FIGURE 4) and placed in plastic bags for freezer storage until they can be hand-washed and dried for photography.

All clothing and personal effects associated with each case are hand-washed by undergraduate volunteers. This reveals any patterns, colors or writing that may have been previously obscured by decompositional fluids. Since clothing can often be used to associate unidentified remains with a missing person, cleaning of personal effects is a crucial to identification efforts. The brown plaid shirt in FIGURE 8 ultimately lead to a positive identification based on information from a missing persons report (FIGURE 9).

All case information is then entered into NamUs (www.namus.gov) and students search through the possible missing persons matches to narrow down potential identifications. DNA samples are sent to the University of North Texas for profiling and uploading into CODIS.

Analysis

Once the UBC remains have sufficiently decomposed, they are transferred from FARF to ORPL, where volunteer undergraduate and graduate students clean and inventory all skeletal remains (FIGURE 5). They are then analyzed by FACTS faculty and graduate students (FIGURE 6) and a forensic anthropological report is generated along with dental radiographs (FIGURE 7). Full craniomorphological and postcranial data are collected prior to curation, pending identification, in secure storage.

DNA sampling in hopes of facilitating positive identifications.

Conclusion

Clothing descriptions, along with biological profiles have facilitated several identifications and DNA results are currently pending for several other cases. Resources for decedent identification within the US, such as the NamUs (FIGURE 8) and CODIS often lack missing persons information or appropriate DNA family reference samples for comparison to UBCs. Therefore, FACTS faculty and students also collaborate with human rights groups such as the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, the Colibrí Center for Human Rights, the South Texas Human Rights Center and foreign consulates, providing agencies with case information.

The Scientific Working Group in Forensic Anthropology (SWGANTH) suggest best practices in education and training in forensic anthropology should include theory, methods, techniques, and forensic casework. This large-scale effort to identify the UBCs in South Texas provides both mentorship and specialized forensic casework training opportunities for graduate and undergraduate students. Students are involved in every aspect of working towards the identification of the UBCs including: intake, maceration, washing clothes, entering personal effects and case information into databases, and collection of DNA samples. Student involvement in case analysis is reserved for graduate students and supervised by faculty. As recommended by SWGANTH, graduate students log their hours spent working on casework to track their specialized training. Student involvement in UBC identification efforts allow students to be involved in the holistic and collaborative nature of forensic anthropology and in this case, provides exposure to a humanitarian crisis within the US.

References