

# The Role of Forensic Anthropology in Identifying Migrant Remains

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## DESCRIPTION

Migrant deaths have become an important issue in forensic anthropology, particularly as global migration patterns continue to shift due to factors such as conflict, economic instability, environmental changes and political persecution. Forensic anthropology, the study of human remains to determine identity and cause of death, plays an important role in uncovering the stories of those who perish while migrating. Migrants often face dangerous, life-threatening paths, whether crossing deserts, oceans or tough terrain and many lose their lives in the process. These deaths are not only tragic but also raise complex ethical, legal and humanitarian concerns. Forensic anthropologists are at the forefront of this issue, tasked with identifying victims and contributing to the broader understanding of the human cost of migration.

## The humanitarian crisis of migrant deaths

Every year, thousands of migrants die while attempting to reach safer or more prosperous destinations. According to organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), many deaths occur in regions like the Mediterranean Sea, the U.S.-Mexico border and the deserts of northern Africa, among other perilous routes. These deaths can result from factors like dehydration, exposure to extreme weather, drowning, violence and accidents, but they often remain unreported or under-researched. The circumstances surrounding migrant deaths are often complex and influenced by political, economic and environmental forces. Global migration policies, including border control measures and the criminalization of migration, can increase in the risk of migrants face. These individuals are often left vulnerable and desperate, resorting to unsafe means of travel, which increases their likelihood of death.

## Forensic anthropology and the identification of migrant remains

Forensic anthropology is pivotal in the identification of migrant remains, which are often found in mass graves, abandoned sites or even in open wilderness. The primary goal is to establish the

identity of deceased individuals, understand the circumstances of death and provide closure to families. This is no small task—migrant remains are frequently decomposed, fragmented or incomplete, requiring a high level of expertise to identify. The role of forensic anthropologists includes analyzing skeletal remains, dental records and other physical characteristics to estimate age, sex, ancestry and stature. They may also examine trauma to determine cause of death, such as signs of violence, blunt force injuries or marks consistent with drowning. In some cases, Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) analysis may provide further insight, especially when there are limited physical remains. Working in collaboration with other professionals such as forensic pathologists, archaeologists and human rights organizations, forensic anthropologists can help piece together the lives and stories of those who perished. Their findings are invaluable not only for identification purposes but also for human rights advocacy, as they often expose patterns of state negligence or the human consequences of tough immigration policies.

## Challenges faced by forensic anthropologists

The investigation of migrant deaths is fraught with significant challenges. Forensic anthropologists frequently work in difficult and hazardous environments, often with limited resources. In many cases, they must operate in regions where the political climate may hinder their work. For instance, access to sites where migrant bodies are found can be restricted and local authorities may be reluctant to engage with non-governmental organizations that investigate human rights abuses. Moreover, the bodies of migrants are often recovered in advanced stages of decomposition, making identification and cause of death difficult to determine. Some migrant remains are discovered in remote areas where natural conditions extreme temperatures or wild animals have further altered the bodies. Forensic anthropologists must also contend with the possibility of racial or ethnic bias, which can impact the investigation and the priority given to identifying migrant victims. One of the most poignant aspects of the migrant death crisis is the lack of family members coming forward to claim the deceased, either due to fear of reprisal or because they are unaware of the victim's fate. The

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absence of personal items or identifying documents on the deceased makes it even more difficult for forensic experts to establish identities. In these instances, forensic anthropologists often rely on databases, cross-referencing missing person reports with the characteristics of the recovered remains.

### **The importance of data collection and international cooperation**

Forensic anthropologists and human rights organizations are important players in gathering data on migrant deaths. Their research contributes to a broader understanding of migration patterns and the dangers migrants face. By documenting these deaths, experts can advocate for changes in migration policy, better search and rescue operations and more humane treatment of migrants. International cooperation is key in addressing the global migrant crisis. Forensic anthropologists work with national governments, international bodies and local communities to ensure that migrant deaths are investigated thoroughly and that the information gathered is used to hold responsible parties accountable. Collaborative efforts also ensure that the dignity of the deceased is respected and that families are given the chance to mourn and understand the circumstances of their loved ones' deaths.

### **Ethical considerations in forensic anthropology**

The ethical considerations of forensic anthropology in migrant death investigations are main. Anthropologists must approach

their work with sensitivity, respect and a commitment to the principles of human rights. Migrants, as vulnerable populations, often experience marginalization in life and the same can be said for their deaths. Forensic anthropologists must be mindful not only of their professional duties but also of the broader societal and political implications of their findings. One significant ethical challenge is ensuring that the identities of the deceased are treated with dignity and confidentiality. Additionally, the findings must be used to advocate for policies that prevent further loss of life and provide accountability for those responsible for unsafe migration conditions.

### **CONCLUSION**

Migrant deaths are a poignant and pressing top transcends issue in forensic anthropology, shedding light on the human cost of migration and the broader political, social and economic factors that drive people to risk everything in search of safety and opportunity. Through detailed and often difficult work, forensic anthropologists provide invaluable contributions to identifying victims, understanding the causes of death and advocating for human rights and policy reforms. As the global migration crisis continues to evolve, forensic anthropology will remain as important tool in addressing the consequences of migrant deaths and ensuring that those who perish are not forgotten.