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Fatal Footsteps: Murder of Undocumented Border Crossers in Maricopa County, Arizona*

ABSTRACT: In the past 5 years, the mortality rate among undocumented workers in Arizona has increased steadily. In 1998–1999, the number of deaths among border crossers was 28. That number increased dramatically in 1999–2000 to 106 and has exceeded 200 in each of the past 2 years. In the past, many immigrant deaths occurred as a result of dehydration and exposure (1). More recently, a new trend has emerged, that is, death of border crossers at the hands of the persons (“*coyotes*”) hired to lead them across the border to safety. In some cases, the smugglers attempt to extort additional money from the families by holding the victims hostage once they have crossed the border into the United States. If the families fail to pay, the hostage is killed. Rival gangs are also murdering one another over their human cargo. Nine recent cases illustrate this trend in Maricopa County. In each example, the victims were bound, shot (or in one instance stabbed) and dumped in a remote desert area. All of the decedents were linked to murder for extortion by the “*coyotes*” or rival gang members.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, forensic anthropology, border issues, homicide

Maricopa County comprises 9226 square miles in the middle of Arizona (1). The average number of examinations by the Medical Examiner has risen each year and is anticipated to top 5000 in 2006 (Dr. Philip Keen, personal communication). The number of undocumented workers flooding into Arizona across the Mexican border has also increased, in part due to tightening of borders in the adjacent states (2–4). While the brunt of the deaths from this flow is borne by Pima County, the large county to the south, Maricopa County has its fair share. One difference in the manner of deaths that appears to affect Maricopa more so than the other border counties is the increase in homicides related to human smuggling.

Available evidence suggests that some *coyotes* have turned from drug trafficking to human smuggling in part because of the large profits that can be made, and in part because the penalties are far less severe (5). In some cases, rival smugglers hijack one another’s cargo and ransom the victims back to their families. In other cases, the original *coyote* holds the border crosser hostage until the family can provide more money. In either case, if the family cannot pay (and in some cases, before the family is contacted), the hostage is killed.

Law enforcement has speculated that the increase in homicide relative to human smuggling may be attributable to several different factors. Those factors include: murder by vigilante groups opposed to the open border, gang warfare among drug smugglers, and finally, extortion and kidnap by *coyotes* and their rivals. The latter theory became the forerunner once a distinctive pattern emerged and the various law enforcement agencies with jurisdiction began collaborating on investigations.

Nine deaths in Maricopa County during the months from March to October 2002 are reflective of this trend. These individuals were recovered from a remote location on the northwestern side of Maricopa County. Each was young to middle-aged and was the victim

of homicidal violence. The period since death in these cases ranges from very recent to several months prior to discovery. Three of the nine remain unidentified. There are striking similarities in these deaths, including the location of recovery, the condition of the victims, and the way in which they were killed. The consistencies suggest that the same group of suspects was involved in the use of this area, or at least that a network of information was available about the remoteness of the site. The location was abandoned after the Sheriff of Maricopa County publicly announced increased surveillance, including tower cameras. No additional bodies have been recovered in this area since this announcement.

The increase in the killings of undocumented workers, as illustrated by the eight cases in this paper, places a different kind of burden on law enforcement and the medical examiner. The autopsies are more protracted while the investigations are more complicated and often lead back to the undocumented worker’s country of origin. Usually, the most complex part of the investigation in the more typical undocumented worker’s death is that of identification and notification of next of kin. If those tasks are accomplished, the body is returned and the case is closed. In the case of homicide, identification of the decedent is only the first step towards resolution of the case.

Background

Human trafficking in Arizona has been on the increase in the last 5 or 6 years due in part to an escalating gang war whereby rival groups of smugglers, known as *coyotes* or “*bajadores*,” have switched from drug smuggling to extortion. *Coyotes* are contracted by individuals and/or their families to guide groups of people across the border from Mexico into the United States. This human cargo is typically poor and vulnerable due to their “illegal” status. That fact, combined with their isolation and dependence on the *coyotes*, make them an easy target for exploitation. The *bajadores*, who used to make their living in the highly risky drug trade, now use the same pathways to profit from trafficking human beings. The twist is that they also have taken to kidnapping their charges and attempting to extort more money from the victim’s families for

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their safe return. This war has led to murder, both of the victims and of rival *coyotes* that attempt to steal cargo from one another. The escalation of murder has placed an additional burden on law enforcement agencies and the Medical Examiner in Maricopa County.

During the 1998–1999 fiscal year, when the new trend first became apparent in Maricopa County, 28 deaths of border crossers were recorded (6). The number steadily increased over time and has exceeded 200 for each of the last 2 years (7). Initially, the deaths of border crossers almost always involved exposure and dehydration (8). During 1999, however, the first victims of homicide began coming into the Forensic Science Center in Maricopa County. These initial victims were killed during a gunfight that broke out between rival gangs of *bajadores* in a parking lot in downtown Phoenix. For law enforcement, the incident was a harbinger not only of the fact that human smuggling was on the increase, but that it was becoming violent (Phoenix Police Department, Homicide Division, personal communication).

Between 1999 and 2002, multiple homicides occurring in over 15 different jurisdictions in the Phoenix metropolitan area exhibited the hallmarks of murder for ransom. However, because of the large network of drug smuggling gangs and the similarities in techniques (binding, torture, and blindfolding) between those used by the drug trade and those of the human smugglers, some of these deaths were not recognized as being related to extortion. The discovery of nine bodies at a remote location in western Maricopa County just north of the intersection of Interstate 10 and Miller Road changed this perspective.

Case Studies

Interstate 10 is a main artery running from Jacksonville, Florida on the east coast to Santa Monica, California on the west coast. As one travels through Phoenix and into the deserts west of Phoenix, there is a last outpost (quickly becoming part of urban sprawl) at Miller Road. Until recently, the northward extension of this road was a dead-end dirt road. Over a 7-month period in late 2002–2003, nine men were dumped in the desert off of Miller Road. With one exception, all nine had similar biological profiles, period since death, and similar hallmarks to the deaths. Eight of the nine bodies were decomposed and involved forensic anthropological examinations.

The nine bodies recovered from Miller Road were all male; eight were either known or presumed to be Mexican Nationals and one was Ecuadorian. All but one died from multiple gunshot wounds and all had some evidence that they were either *coyotes* or kidnap victims (Maricopa County Sheriff's Office, General Investigations/Homicide Division, personal communication). The first individual recovered is the one that initially sparked my interest because of the story behind his death.

Victim no. 1 was discovered in a skeletal state in a wash (dry riverbed) at the end of Miller Road. He was bound with his hands behind his back. Ironically, he was one of the last victims found but one of the first killed and disposed of in the recovery location. He also suffered from multiple sharp implement wounds, rather than gunshot wounds (Fig. 3). Once he was identified, interviews with his girlfriend indicated that she had been contacted on several occasions by the men responsible for helping him across the border and that they wanted more money for his safe release. Further investigation revealed that he was already dead at the time she was first contacted by the *coyotes* (Maricopa County Sheriff's Office, General Investigations/Homicide Division, personal communication).

Because this victim was discovered last, detectives already had a sense of the murder for ransom schemes that were becoming more prevalent in the Phoenix area. Eight other bodies, all with similar characteristics, had already been retrieved from Miller Road. These eight ranged from badly decomposed and mummified to fairly fresh (Figs. 1–3). All of the bodies were bound at the wrists in some fashion, gagged, and blindfolded (Figs. 4–6). Each of the victims was killed by multiple gunshot wounds (Fig. 7) but many also had contusions and abrasions consistent with antemortem or perimortem mistreatment. Whether the victims also endured torture was difficult to discern, given the condition of the bodies and the fact that the techniques used overlap with those used in rival gangs of drug smugglers. There is evidence from one of the early incidents in a rural area east and south of Phoenix that torture may be involved, including teeth forcibly removed (Phoenix Police Department, Homicide Division, personal communication). Blindfolding was consistently used in these bodies and was also starting to be seen elsewhere in the valley, both in suspected drug smuggling cases and in the murder for ransom cases. Until the 7-month dumping spree, jurisdictions were struggling to determine whether the



FIG. 1—An example of blind-folded, bound fresh decedent from Miller Road.



FIG. 2—Mummified bound remains from Miller Road.



FIG. 3—Badly mummified remains exhibiting sharp-force traumata from Miller Road.



FIG. 6—Blind-folded victim from Miller Road.



FIG. 4—Wrist binding used on the Miller Road victims.



FIG. 5—Ankle binding used on the Miller Road victims.



FIG. 7—Gunshot wounds from one of the Miller Road victims.

victims from around the valley were part of the vast drug network in Arizona or more “true” victims. The identification of several of the men from Miller Road helped distinguish the two types of murders.

The victims from Miller Road all fit a similar profile. They were male and ranged in age from 17 to the mid-50s, although most of them were in their mid to late 20s and early 30s. The first one recovered had a single gunshot wound to the head but the majority of the victims had multiple gunshot wounds. The last body to be discovered, and the one that sparked this paper, died from multiple incised wounds. There are two theories regarding this discrepancy: first, that he was the very first person killed by this particular gang; second, that he was a true victim rather than a rival *coyote* being killed over an attempted hijacking.

Forensic anthropology on these victims involved an assessment of trauma in particular reconstructing gunshot wound trajectories (Figs. 8 and 9) and providing information that would assist in the

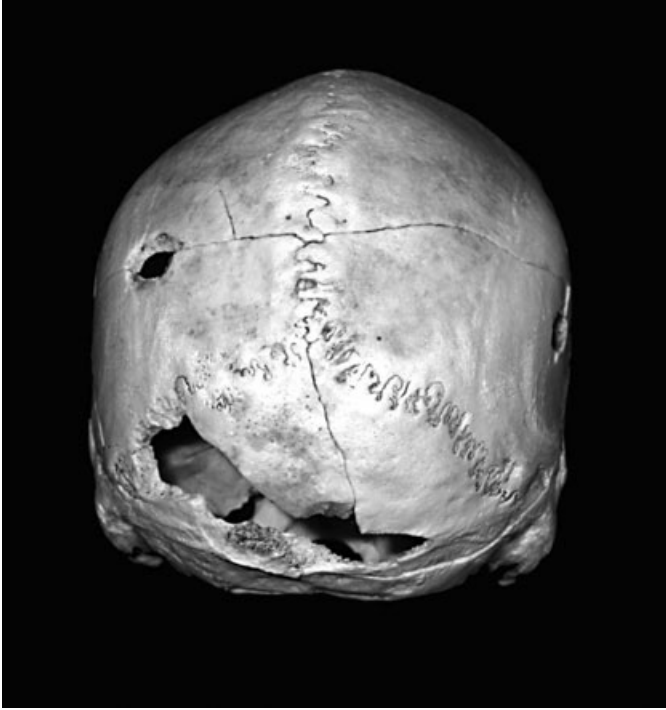


FIG. 8—Macerated cranium demonstrating gunshot wound defects (posterior view).

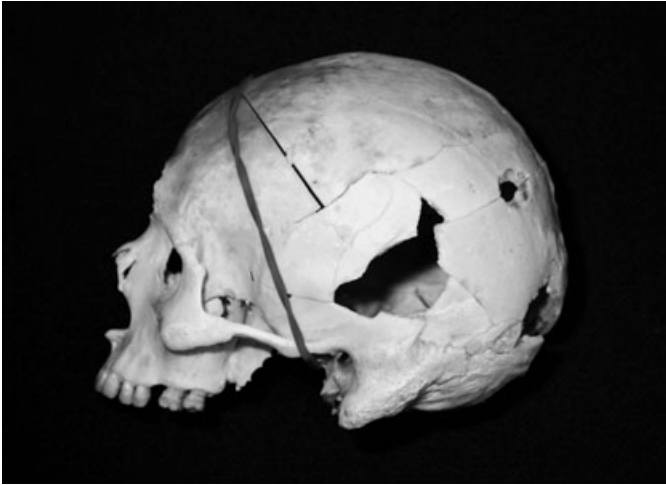


FIG. 9—Macerated cranium demonstrating gunshot wound defects (lateral view).

identification of the decedent. In most cases, the bodies came into the Forensic Science Center without identification. The author was usually asked to assist at the autopsy and perform additional maceration as necessary. The initial examination was usually followed by assessments of age-at-death, sex, ancestry, estimated living stature, identifying characteristics, and traumata. Once these were determined, a follow-up examination was conducted with the forensic pathologist. In each case, a multi-disciplinary approach was used to establish cause and manner of death. The investigation performed by law enforcement, the autopsy and forensic anthropology examination, toxicology, and criminalistics all played a role in the final analysis.

After the nine bodies were recovered from Miller Road, all of the jurisdictions having murders with the classic hallmarks of

binding, blindfolding, and multiple gunshot wounds formed a task force. They discovered that there was a full-scale war going on in Maricopa County. Individuals were being reported kidnapped off the street, *coyotes* were raiding safe houses, and the between-gang violence was increasing as *coyotes* armed themselves against one another. Law enforcement agencies further observed that the number of homicides associated with human trafficking was increasing as the war between the *bajadores* escalated.

Current State of Affairs

There is a regular flow of undocumented workers from Mexico and further south. These individuals are transported in vans and large trucks through Arizona, usually on back roads. The greater Phoenix metropolitan area is a point of deposit and distribution for these groups (5). The task force discovered that gangs of *bajadores* would lie in wait for the cargo vans and ambush them in an attempt to hijack the workers. This escalation came to a head in November of 2003, when there was a shootout on Interstate 10 between Tucson and Phoenix. The incident began when individuals in two cars hijacked a group of undocumented workers from a pick-up site and were chased by the gang actually contracted to take them to Phoenix for distribution. The shootout resulted in four wounded, four dead, and a 9-h shutdown of the major artery connecting Tucson to Phoenix. This incident brought the situation into the public eye, resulting in massive media coverage and increased funding and pressure for the task force.

Since July of 2003, dozens more homicides have been attributed to the rival gang wars. This resulted in the formation of a special group called Operation ICE Storm that was implemented in September 2004. This group is specifically mandated to reduce the crime associated with human smuggling. The number of homicides, robberies, aggravated assaults, and immigrant kidnappings have dropped steadily as the result of activities by ICE (9). While the number of kidnappings is down in the Phoenix metropolitan area, other more rural areas, such as Eloy and Buckeye, Arizona, are being hard hit. During the month of May, investigators in Eloy found five different drop houses. The Buckeye Police Department reported an increase in vehicle stops containing undocumented workers along Interstate 85, a bypass from I-8 to I-10 for people traveling to California. And in early August 2005, a drop house was raided in Peoria, Arizona (within the Phoenix Metropolitan area) and 25 undocumented workers were freed. They reported that they had been held without food or water while relatives were being contacted for more money.

As this manuscript was being prepared for publication, another shootout occurred on Interstate 10, south of Phoenix and, in a separate incident, a homicide victim was brought to the Forensic Science Center, bound and wrapped with duct tape. During the incident on the freeway, two people were shot and the highway was closed for several hours as the investigation took place. In both incidents *bajadores* are the prime suspects.

In spite of the increased danger, individuals still funnel through Mexico and make the long, hot, and dangerous trek through the Arizona desert. *Coyotes* typically charge \$1400 for transport from Mexico, \$4000–\$6000 from Central America and up to \$10,000 or \$50,000 from Asia and Europe (10). Given this type of monetary incentive, with the added bonus of potential ransom, *bajadores* are unlikely to cease their deadly activities, and undocumented workers will continue to perish.

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