

## Anonymity of Death Echoes Life For Undocumented Latino Immigrants

Unidentified Bodies Are a Growing Challenge for Authorities

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Etched on the ring on the dead man's finger were a woman's name and a date, and that is how Virginia Chief Medical Examiner Marcella Fierro knows he had a wife, perhaps children -- that in life, he was somebody to someone.

Not so in death.

When the Hispanic man came to Fierro's morgue in Richmond, he had no name, no address and no one to claim him. Over the years, a forensic artist would construct a clay bust of him, police would circulate his picture in the Latino community and embassies' officials would reach out overseas. But with no leads, never a hint at a name, the man would remain unidentified -- no one to nobody.

"I would love to send him home," Fierro said. "We recognize there is probably someone out there looking for him, and we're looking for them. But it's like two ships passing in the night."

There have always been people who are difficult, or impossible, to identify after death, including the homeless and crime victims who are purposely hidden. But law-enforcement officials are seeing an increasing number from another group: Hispanic immigrants, most probably undocumented. Many don't carry identification, and, if they do, the name is often false. And when a real name does surface, investigators say, other identification hurdles await: no fingerprints on file, no school records, no dental history and, sometimes, no one wanting to claim them -- or someone too afraid to.

In Montgomery County, a man from Honduras had been using his brother's name when he was found dead in a parking lot. In Fairfax County, a Mexican man died when a detached garage that he and others had huddled in for heat caught fire. The case of a man who was found shot, lying partially dressed near a canoe launch in 2002, continues to stump Richmond authorities.

No one keeps count of how many immigrants go unidentified each year, and without a name, it is nearly impossible to know whether they are illegal. But law-enforcement officials say that as the foreign-born population has increased, so have these types of cases. Hispanics pose special investigative challenges because of their hesitation to deal with authorities for fear of deportation and the sparse paper trail of their existence. Because so many don't want to be on the radar in life, they fall off it in death.

About a third of the region's foreign-born population is Hispanic, but Hispanics make up more than half of the undocumented population, said Jeffrey S. Passel of the Pew Hispanic Center. In a forthcoming study, the Urban Institute estimates that in 2003 and 2004, 345,000 illegal immigrants lived in the region.

Ricardo Juarez of Mexicans Without Borders said this group's vulnerability in death starts with its tentative position in life. Because they fear deportation, they avoid police. And because they cannot obtain legitimate licenses but must get to work, they carry false ones, he said. "People do things like that because they are scared," Juarez said. "It's a survival skill." As far as the consequences of going unidentified after death, he added: "It's a symptom that something is not right."

Two young Hispanic men, one possibly a teenager, were just skeletons when they were found in a wooded area off Interstate 95 in Caroline County, Va. They wore Rustler jeans and western-style shirts with pearl buttons. The older man wore a belt with the name Silvano and a pendant of the Virgin Mary that says in Spanish, "Pray for us."

"How they got there, I got no idea," said James R. Lyons, a special agent with the Virginia State Police. "Where they were going? Where they were coming from? No idea."

Detectives say they often work backward when investigating these cases, whether unattended natural deaths, homicides or traffic fatalities. A Mexican flag on a belt buckle might lead them to the Mexican Embassy. A CVS card in a pocket might lead them to a place that might then lead them to a friend who might know a relative. They check missing person reports, run fingerprints through criminal and government databases and sometimes file "Black Notices" with international police.

Often, they seek out someone like Catyana Skory.

A forensic artist for the Prince William County police, Skory ensures that even if people are nameless, they are not faceless. She can look at a skull and sketch what the person might have looked like.

Prince William police struggled in November to identify a young woman who was one of four victims of a fatal accident on Route 28. Possibly in her 20s, she had full lips, a broad nose and almond-shaped eyes. She was known only by the nickname "Ingrid." Lt. Chris Feather, who heads the crash unit, said police followed several leads but repeatedly met resistance from a community known to distrust authorities.

"We'd call and ask a pointed question, and they'd hang up," Feather said.

After Skory's sketch was published in several newspapers, police learned that the woman was a 17-year-old from Honduras living in the area without relatives. An acquaintance identified her, police said.

Although most John and Jane Does are eventually identified, sometimes after weeks or months, others will lie nameless in the morgue until space runs out, then will be turned over to local authorities for burial or cremation.

At the end of last year, the bodies of three unidentified men, believed to be immigrants, lay in the Northern Virginia medical examiner's office, said William H. Whildin, a former Fairfax detective who is an investigator for the Fairfax office.

Medical examiners must also stray from normal means of investigation. Fingerprints are one of the first things they use to try to identify someone, then dental records.

"But where do I go to get those records?" Whildin asked.

The difficulty, he said, starts at the beginning, with a name that never seems to be correct.

"That creates major problems for everything: death certificates, autopsy reports, the lab reports," he said. "The same thing with age. Are they really 35?"

In May, park police in Wheaton found a dead man in a parking lot. Police got a name and age -- Roque Jacinto Rivera, 33 -- but when they called family members in Honduras to notify them, they were told the name belonged to the man's dead brother, said Blanca Kling, the Hispanic liaison in Montgomery County. The man's real name was Josue Lagos-Rivera, and he was 30.

Kling also notified a family after a Hispanic man was hit by a car. He was a John Doe for several weeks; the family never reported him missing because he was known to disappear for days at a time, she said.

"When we went to the house, I asked them if they knew where their father was. They said he always went to visit his friend," she said. "They were devastated."

Fierro said part of the reason many immigrants go unidentified and unclaimed is that there is no central database for families to search. Information such as fingerprints and dental information are entered into the National Crime Information Center, but the public

cannot search it without a law enforcement official's help, she said. Some states have detailed databases for unidentified bodies, but Fierro said that doesn't help a woman in Mexico who has not heard from her husband in two months and does not know where he last lived.

"Families can find anything they want on eBay. Why shouldn't they be able to find their person?" she said. "The odds are there is someone out there caring and looking and wondering what happened to their person. And it's entirely possible he could be sitting in someone's morgue."

She thinks that is what happened to the man with the ring.

"That's him," said Fierro, motioning to the green-hued clay bust gathering dust on a top shelf in a conference room. "He's been sitting there, sitting there, sitting there *and* sitting there."

The man, who was shot and left on the side of Interstate 95 in Hanover County, came to Fierro in 1982. He would be the first of several unidentified, unclaimed Hispanic people her office would deal with over the years, and his case bothers her to this day.

She estimates that he is between 25 and 40. He was wearing a gold crucifix and a Seiko watch with the dates in Spanish, which tells her he was more comfortable in that language. The name Lucy and the date 4-14-75 are on his ring. The clothes he was wearing the day he died are draped on the bust: a thick white knit sweater over a baby blue T-shirt that reads, "Someone went to Florida and all I got was this lousy T-shirt."

"He has all these attachments. That's what makes you crazy," Fierro said. "He has a wedding ring. He wears a watch. He has a sweater that only a wife would buy."



A forensic artist constructed this clay bust of a dead Hispanic man found in Virginia in 1982. But that and his jewelry offered few clues to his identity. (By Linda Davidson -- The Washington Post