LOST BUT NOT FORGOTTEN: FINDING THE NATION'S MISSING

BY **DANIELLE WEISS, DAWN SCHWARTING, CHARLES HEURICH,** AND **HEATHER WALTKE**

As NamUs nears its 10th anniversary, we reflect on the program's history, successes, and continued commitment to helping families. The NamUs program provides police officers, medical examiners and coroners, and other criminal justice professionals with the investigative and scientific tools needed to find missing persons, identify decedents and victims of crime, resolve criminal cases, and reduce violent crime and human trafficking. In addition to the NamUs program, other NIJ-funded missing persons programs from across the country have made great strides in resolving cases and bringing the lost home.

When a loved one goes missing, every day that passes is a painful reminder of that person's absence. Finding the lost is not an easy task, but it is a critical responsibility we have to families.

In March 1994, Maryland police found the body of a deceased male with extensive injuries to his face. No identification could be made at the time. For 14 years, he remained a John Doe and his family had no idea what had happened to him. It would take a community coming together to identify him.

In March 2008, the Maryland Center for Missing and Unidentified Persons (Maryland Center) helped the state medical examiner's office upload its unidentified persons cases to NIJ's National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), a repository and resource center for the nation's missing and unidentified persons. A request was made to have a forensic artist create an image of the man's face using old photographs found in the original missing persons file. In September 2008, an improved image of the man's

National Missing and Unidentified Persons System
NamUs

NamUs is a cornerstone to ensuring that criminal justice agencies have the tools they need to help families, further investigations, and solve some of the most complex cases.

likeness was added to the NamUs case profile. A local newspaper ran a story about the case and included the new image. Within two weeks, a woman contacted the Maryland Center saying she believed the man in the story was David Riddick, her missing 23-year-old nephew. Further investigation confirmed David's identity. His family learned that he had been shot to death while walking home from a missing person's vigil in Baltimore City. After 14 years, David was finally returned home.

Carla Proudfoot, director of the Maryland Center, said, "NamUs was instrumental in getting this case solved and bringing some resolution to the man's aunt." She added that the case highlighted the importance of communication and collaboration between criminal justice agencies, especially those in neighboring jurisdictions, and engaging with families and the general public to help resolve these heartbreaking cases.[1]

NamUs is a cornerstone to ensuring that state and local criminal justice agencies have the tools they need to help families and further investigations. Housed in NIJ's Office of Investigative and Forensic Sciences, NamUs is a web-based system provided free of charge to medical examiners, coroners, law enforcement officials, allied forensic professionals, families with lost loved ones, the general public, and anyone else who is trying to resolve these cases. NamUs is a permission-based system, meaning it offers both a publicly viewable area and a restricted criminal justice-sensitive environment, ensuring the protection of privileged information. With diverse users in all 50 states and all U.S. territories, NamUs is a collaborative system that bridges the communication gap among stakeholders, fostering enhanced information sharing and investigative case support.

As the program approaches its 10-year anniversary, the U.S. Department of Justice and NIJ remain committed to their mission to provide leadership, resources, and solutions for creating safe, just, and engaged communities, and to create partnerships with other public and private agencies and organizations. As such, NIJ continues to upgrade and expand the NamUs system and its offerings to better meet the needs of criminal justice agencies and searching families and to help solve some of the most complex cases.

Still Searching

NamUs is a forum for families, across generations, to know that their loved one has not been forgotten. The oldest case in NamUs is a gentleman named Elijah Cravens, who has been missing since 1902. Cravens was last known to be riding a horse to the Woodsman of the World Fair in Oklahoma. He was never heard from again. Although he may not be found, he will always have a resting place in NamUs, where he will be remembered.

Another cold case dates back to 1920. Marvin Clark disappeared in Oregon after boarding a stagecoach on his way to a doctor's appointment. His family continues to seek answers. Based on family reference samples, NamUs recently performed mitochondrial DNA analysis on an unidentified person also found in Oregon. Although the mitochondrial DNA did not match, Clark's family knows that NamUs will continue to search.

A Brief Look Back

In 2007, NIJ reported on the "Nation's Silent Mass Disaster," describing the more than 100,000 active missing persons cases and more than 40,000 sets of unidentified human remains in the United States.[2] At the time, resources to assist with unidentified remains and missing persons were minimal and disjointed, and something needed to be done.

NIJ hosted the Identifying the Missing Summit in 2005, during which the missing persons community voiced a need for improved access to missing persons information. They identified two principal needs. The first was a centralized repository for the nation's unidentified and a way to capture essential information, including biometrics that would allow for comparisons with open missing persons cases. The second was a way to close the communication gap between agencies, jurisdictions, and the public so they could share information, collaborate on cases when needed, and help relatives in their search for family members.

To help meet these needs, NIJ created two programs to aid the country in reporting, locating, and identifying missing persons. The first program was NamUs. The second — Using DNA Technology to Identify the Missing — complements NamUs services by helping medical examiners, coroners, law enforcement agencies, and allied professionals collect and analyze DNA samples; employ other critical identification methods such as fingerprints, dental records, and anthropology; and foster relationships and build bridges within the community to gather more robust data on the nation's lost.

By the end of 2007, the NamUs unidentified decedents database was online, followed by the missing persons database. NIJ continued to expand the system and added another complementary database for unclaimed persons, which includes deceased people who have been identified but for whom no next of kin has been located to claim them.

As of February 2017, NamUs contains records for 12,833 missing persons, 11,335 unidentified

Exhibit 1. Active NamUs Missing Persons (MP) Cases by State

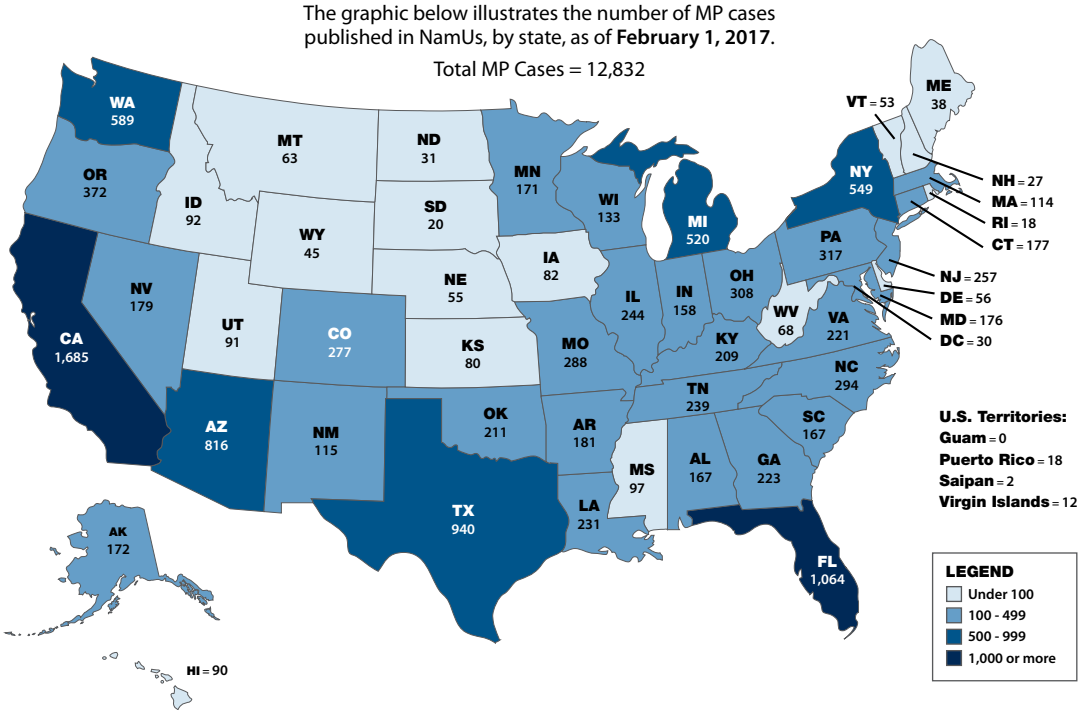
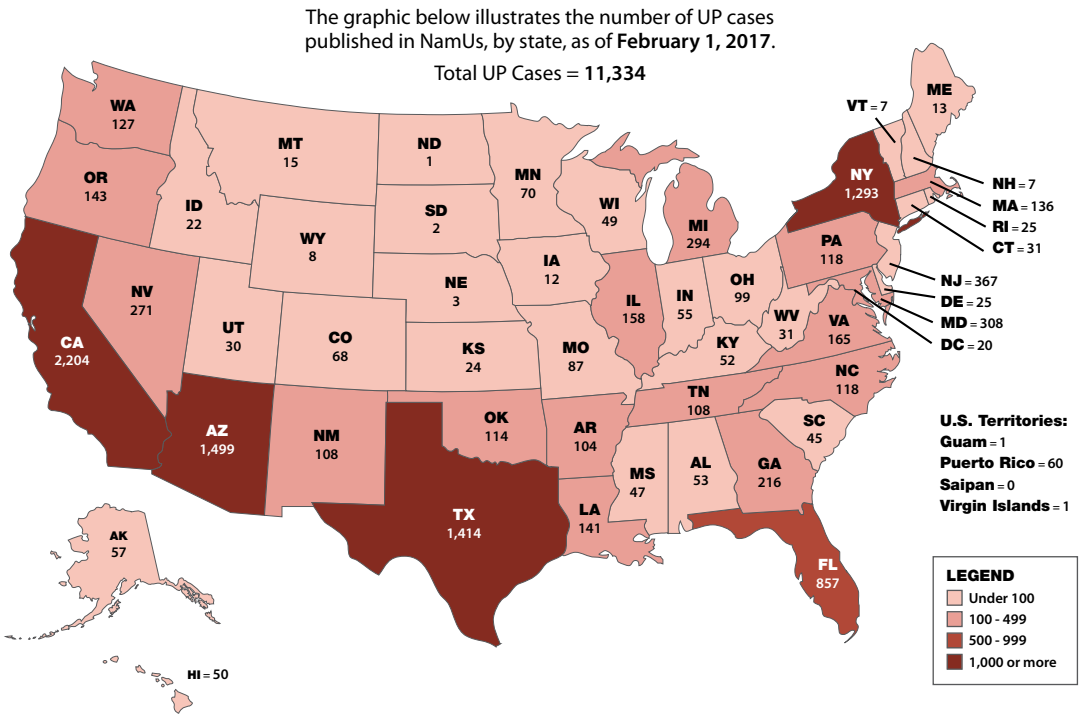


Exhibit 2. Active NamUs Unidentified Persons (UP) Cases by State

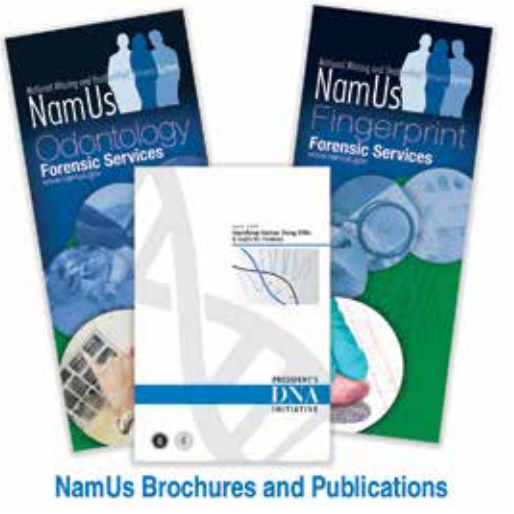


persons, and 2,582 unclaimed persons (see exhibits 1 and 2); and the number of cold cases[3] continues to grow.

Technical Assistance and Forensic Services

Although the crux of NamUs is its centralized database system, the program has evolved over time into a network of services that are currently managed by the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification in collaboration with NIJ. Eight regional system administrators (RSAs) throughout the country help bridge the gap between family members, law enforcement, medical examiners and coroners, and NamUs services. RSAs provide training and direct technical assistance to stakeholders and families. Cold cases are the most challenging and complex cases to solve — every unidentified person has someone searching for answers, and many of these cases lead to an unresolved death investigation. RSAs provide critical support and technical assistance to law enforcement and medical examiners nationwide — services in need of expansion as thousands of new missing and unidentified persons cases arise each year. (See sidebar, "Still Searching.")

Funding from NamUs[4] and the Using DNA Technology to Identify the Missing program[5] provides community and professional stakeholders with numerous benefits,



NamUs Brochures and Publications

Finding Loved Ones Alive

NamUs has had numerous resolutions over the years and has reunited lost loved ones with their families. Sometimes the missing person is located alive and safe. For example, NamUs reunited a man from Uganda with his family, who had lost contact with him. In another case, a man who went missing from Colorado was located in Florida six years later.

Whether a person is lost, voluntarily missing, or abducted, the case is an open investigation for law enforcement. Law enforcement officials have credited NamUs with their ability to close cases and help conserve limited resources. Unfortunately, not all cases have a happy ending, but NamUs can still support medical examiners, coroners, law enforcement, and families by facilitating information sharing and providing a search forum.

including family reference sample kits; DNA testing of unidentified remains; and other forensic services, such as fingerprint, anthropology, and odontology assistance, provided free of charge to any jurisdiction in the country. NamUs also has a toll-free phone number[6] available to assist people who lack access to the internet, have questions, or need translation services. The missing persons and unidentified persons databases and NamUs resources are also available in Spanish.[7]

What NamUs Data Show

In addition to the many services NamUs provides to criminal justice agencies, the system can also offer invaluable insights into the nation's lost. For instance, of the 12,950 active missing persons cases in NamUs as of February 2017, 5,440 (42 percent) involve missing females and 7,510 (58 percent) involve missing males. Of those, the average age of missing females and males is 30 years and 36 years, respectively, with an overall average age of 33 years for all active missing persons.

Resolution of long-term cold cases can sometimes be complicated by factors such as where someone was last seen, where they were thought to have been, and communication failures between agencies across jurisdictional boundaries. However, many missing persons cases are resolved quickly. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Crime Information Center, 661,000 missing persons cases were reported in 2012, but only 2,079 were still active at the end of the year.[8]

Many reported missing persons are found alive. Of the 12,621 missing persons cases in NamUs that have been resolved, 9,584 (76 percent) were located alive, and 3,037 (24 percent) were found to be deceased. Of the missing persons who were recovered alive, 5,189 (54 percent) were female and 4,393 (46 percent) were male. The mean age for all missing persons found alive is 26 years, with a mean age of 22 years for missing females found alive and 30 years for missing males found alive. However, what all of these individuals have in common is that someone was searching for them. (See sidebar, "Finding Loved Ones Alive.")

Many of the unidentified human remains that are entered into NamUs are not readily identifiable. Of the 11,335 active unidentified persons cases in NamUs, only 2,745 (24 percent) were noted to have recognizable faces. Factors that prevent visual recognition of the decedent include, but are not limited to, burning/charring, insect predation, traumatic injury, decomposition, and skeletonization of the body due to environmental factors (see exhibits 3 and 4).

A gender disparity was noted for the unidentified persons in NamUs — of the 2,988 missing persons

Exhibit 3. Resolved NamUs Unidentified Persons Cases by Identification Method		
Identification Method	**Number of Cases**	**Percentage of Cases**
DNA (mtDNA and/or nucDNA)	1,437	45.63
Fingerprint	610	19.37
Circumstantial	283	8.99
Dental	245	7.78
Anthropology	216	6.86
Visual	216	6.86
No ID method provided to NamUs	96	3.05
Body radiographs	46	1.46

Exhibit 4. Active NamUs Unidentified Persons Cases by Condition of Body		
Recognizable Remains	**Number of Cases**	**Percentage of Cases**
Recognizable face	2,745	24.88
Unrecognizable Remains	**Number of Cases**	**Percentage of Cases**
Charred/burned	323	3.90
Decomposition	2,491	30.06
Insect activity	51	0.62
Mummification	293	3.54
Near or complete skeleton	1,308	15.78
Partial remains with soft tissue	510	6.15
Partial skeletal remains	3,033	36.60
Traumatic injuries	278	3.35
Total Unrecognizable Cases	**8,287**	
Unknown Recognition	**Number of Cases**	**Percentage of Cases**
Null body condition field	303	2.67
Total Cases	**11,335**	

who were found deceased, 960 (32 percent) involved missing women and 2,028 (68 percent) involved missing men. Additional research is needed to discern the cause of this disparity.

Applying Evolving Technology to Solve Cases

As noted above, when unidentified remains are recovered, a visual identification is often not possible given the state of the remains; however, many forensic technologies and tools can help investigators. NIJ's Office of Investigative and Forensic Sciences has a robust research and development portfolio that supports the enhancement and creation of tools and techniques to identify, collect, analyze, interpret, and preserve evidence. For example, DNA analysis techniques can produce a profile from minute and degraded samples. Mitochondrial DNA (inherited through maternal genes) and Y-STR (inherited through paternal genes) are two common DNA analysis methods that can provide useful information when looking for familial relationships. NIJ grantees such as the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner[9] and the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification[10] assist criminal justice agencies around the country by using techniques to extract DNA from bone samples and apply specialized anthropological expertise to degraded skeletal remains.

New and developing technologies allow scientists to offer medical examiners more leads into what a person might have looked like. Phenotypic DNA analysis is an evolving process that examines information from a DNA profile to predict physical features of the sample's contributor. For example, NIJ funded Yale University researchers in their development of high-resolution single nucleotide polymorphisms — variations in one's DNA — for forensic identification of ancestry, family, and phenotype from DNA samples. Also, the University of Tennessee began evaluating a forensic chip assay and phenotypic analysis system to assess the utility and accuracy to predict phenotypic characteristics from skeletal remains.

Through NIJ's Using DNA Technology to Identify the Missing program, agencies are able to bring new technologies to the field and integrate innovative techniques. For example, the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner purchased a 3D printer that enables it to recreate the skulls of unidentified persons. Forensic artists can then complete facial reconstructions without harming the original skull. The University of South Florida's[11] Institute of Forensic Anthropology and Applied Sciences provides a similar service and coordinates events such as the Art of Forensics program, a mass media event to display facial reconstructions completed at the institute to help identify the nameless.

Other forensic technologies being used include facial and clothing imaging. Facial imaging is similar to 3D facial reconstruction except that the skull is scanned into a computer system and computer programs then create the image. This same technique can be used on other items of evidence, such as clothing and artifacts found with the person. Radiographic analysis is also used to examine the bodies and note any old or new injuries or abnormalities.

Several agencies are also using stable isotope analysis to help determine the possible region in which an unidentified person recently lived. For example, isotopes, which are different forms of the same chemical element, vary in water and in specific foods that people eat. The variation in isotope ratios found in human remains can help scientists and investigators assess a person's recent geographical residence or travel history. New York City, commonly referred to as the melting pot of the world, has used isotopic analysis on at least 88 cases. NIJ also offers funding for pollen analysis, which has been proposed for use in the forensic analysis of unidentified persons cases to help place a person in a specific region.

Program Successes

NIJ grantees have used federal funding in many ways, from testing individual cases within their state to undertaking large-scale projects. For example,

Missing Persons Days

Several NIJ awardees support missing persons days, events in which the host agency encourages people who have a missing family member or friend to gather at a specified location. These events often include educational sessions to learn about missing persons resources; collection of DNA family reference samples; collection of personal and descriptive information, records, and photos of the missing loved one; and collection of the missing person's personal items that might still be a viable source for their DNA, such as a toothbrush.

NamUs does not house DNA profiles; samples are analyzed and profiles are uploaded into the Combined DNA Index System. Known DNA samples and data are essential for missing persons databases to be successful in making identifications, and missing persons days have been effective in obtaining case and forensic information. For example, the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner solved nine missing persons cases through its 2015 missing persons day. In one case, a woman attended the missing persons day in hopes of finding her 63-year-old sister. Her family reference sample provided the information needed to identify a woman who had died after being hit by a train in 2007.

the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner completed 39 exhumations for the Potter's Field Identification Project[12] to help resolve more than 200 missing persons cases and identify the approximately 1,200 unidentified persons buried in the city's Potter's Field graveyard since the late 1980s. Additionally, the University of South Florida's Institute of Forensic Anthropology and Applied Sciences exhumed 51 sets of human remains from the grounds of the Dozier School for Boys, which was under state investigation to examine the suspicious circumstances of children who died or went missing while in custody.[13]

One important factor contributing to the thousands of unidentified remains found in the United States is the increase in foreign nationals migrating to this country and those who fall victim to human trafficking, especially along the southern border states of Texas, Arizona, and California. Many of the human remains recovered in this region have limited or no records available to assist with an identification. Through NIJ programs, the Conference of Western Attorneys General (CWAG)[14] has been working with the Mexican states of Baja California, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Guanajuato, and Sonora to obtain family reference samples — DNA samples collected from family

Through NIJ programs, the Conference of Western Attorneys General is working to solve missing persons cases that cross borders.

members of the missing for forensic identification. The CWAG project is the first international collaborative effort of its type. Collaboration is critical to help resolve these cases across borders. To that end, CWAG has also assisted with cases of U.S. citizens who may have died while in Mexico. With the use of NIJ funding, CWAG facilitated the identification of a U.S. citizen found in Rosarito, Mexico, and was able to provide some resolution to the family and return

Families Helping in the Search

NamUs is the only "cemetery" many families can visit until their loved one is found. In 2016, an unidentified male was found deceased in the Arizona desert. The local medical examiner's office entered the decedent's information into NamUs, including information about a tattoo. At the same time, the young man's family had been regularly searching NamUs. Once the medical examiner entered the man into the system, the family almost immediately identified their loved one by some of his unique features. Not only was the case resolved, but the family did not have to feel helpless. Families can be involved in the process.

their loved one to the United States. The project also obtained a Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) match that connected a set of remains to a family in Guanajuato, Mexico, and 13 CODIS matches to unidentified remains submitted by the Pima County (Arizona) Office of the Medical Examiner.

But More Can Still Be Done

The Bureau of Justice Statistics' Census of Medical Examiner and Coroner Offices, released in 2004,[15] found that about 4,400 unidentified human decedents are reported in an average year, 1,000 of whom remain unidentified after one year. Cold case investigators require more resources and access to innovative techniques to tackle growing caseloads; however, state, local, and tribal resources continue to be scarce and agency priorities limit the investigative assets that can be dedicated to these cases. As cases persist, NIJ programs provide invaluable resources to stakeholders across the country to help find missing persons and identify human remains, ensuring that new as well as cold cases can be investigated, innovative tools and techniques can be employed, and no one is forgotten.

Law enforcement, medical examiners and coroners, forensic laboratories, and families and loved ones of the missing and unidentified need access to additional support services. Exhumation assistance, victim advocacy support, and proactive forensic sample collection, for example, would enhance support and better assist agencies and families. A proactive measure, such as biometric collection kits (e.g., fingerprints, DNA swabs, and dental records), could be offered to families for personal retention, which would provide valuable identification information in the unfortunate event that a person goes missing. Future outreach activities could focus on vulnerable and at-risk populations, as well as on families with children who are traveling or leaving home to attend college. Additional facial reconstruction services would present a greater opportunity for public identification of remains that are no longer recognizable.

Forensic DNA testing, facial reconstruction, and isotope and phenotype analysis are all very expensive, but law enforcement needs access to these state-of-the-art techniques if they hope to resolve these cases, strengthen public safety, and help reduce crime. These forensic services — when coupled with missing persons days (see sidebar, "Missing Persons Days"), DNA family reference sample collections, dental and fingerprint examinations, and other outreach service campaigns — will hopefully lead to more case resolutions.

How do resource shortfalls affect a searching family? In one recent case, it took two years to exhume an unidentified female to collect a DNA sample due to funding and resource shortages. Although a lead was identified after 25 years of searching, the family had to wait two additional years for funding to become available to make the identification. More can and should be done.

Currently, Congress does not mandate the use of NamUs, so it is up to states and the community of

stakeholders to drive this voluntary system forward, as the system is only as strong as the cases that it contains. After 10 years, stakeholder successes have encouraged states to embrace the use of NamUs. Currently, five states have passed state laws that include the use of NamUs. Although it still does not mandate the use of NamUs by law, California has been an active user and advocate of the system since inception, passing legislation that removed a barrier to sharing law enforcement information with the NamUs system and including NamUs in its training guidelines.[16] Connecticut, New York, and Tennessee passed legislation mandating that all medical examiners enter decedent information into NamUs.[17] The professional community is also embracing the value of NamUs: the National Association of Medical Examiners has included a NamUs link on its webpage, and the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners has included the use of NamUs in its accreditation checklist requirements.

NamUs 2.0

NamUs is currently undergoing a technology enterprise upgrade to enhance the suite of services that can be offered to state and local communities. In addition to an enhanced user experience and search capabilities, NIJ is focusing on a gap identified during its strategic planning: a subpopulation in need. Mass-casualty, large-scale, and multistate incidents — often called "critical incidents" — present unique challenges when it comes to finding missing persons and reuniting families. The attacks on September 11, the Boston Marathon bombings, hurricanes and tornadoes, disease outbreaks, and transportation disasters are just a few of the tragic incidents that have occurred on a massive scale and at a very high human cost.[18] As part of the NamUs upgrade, a new component is being developed to help agencies deal with the issues of victim accounting, identification, and reunification during critical-incident events. NamUs has taken up the call to help law enforcement, medical examiners, coroners, emergency responders, and the public account for and hopefully reunite families during these chaotic events.

Join the Search

Missing and unidentified persons cases have public safety and public health implications. The identification of a person is the first step in any investigation, and any corresponding evidence uncovered could lead to resolution or justice for those lost. Many of these cases are the result of criminal activity or occurred under suspicious circumstances; therefore, identifying those who remain nameless will directly assist in safeguarding the country as a whole.

Ten years after its inception, NamUs remains committed to finding those reported missing and identifying those who are found but unknown. The program coordinates with state and local law enforcement agencies and medical examiners and coroners agencies to increase the quality of data, strengthen investigative services, and foster communication. NamUs continues to identify and provide needed resources to underserved and underfunded stakeholders who have significant roles and responsibilities in supporting these federal, state, local, and tribal criminal justice communities. The system directly affects criminal investigations and the resolution of missing persons and unidentified remains cases through technical assistance and forensic and analytic services, and it provides a forum for the public to provide leads and help in the search for loved ones (see sidebar, "Families Helping in the Search"). NamUs increases the quality of case data and the timeliness of information sharing that is so critically needed to inform criminal justice and public safety partners.

The U.S. Department of Justice is committed to helping the lost find their way home to their families, supporting law enforcement agencies in their search for the missing, and helping the medical examiners and coroners who are the final voice for the dead. To join the search or for more information, please visit NamUs.gov — where the lost will never be forgotten.

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For More Information

Learn more about NamUs at NamUs.gov.

Read more about NIJ funding to help identify missing persons at NIJ.ojp.gov, keyword: missing persons funding.

Notes

1. Beth Pearsall and Danielle Weiss, "Solving Missing Persons Cases," *NIJ Journal* 264, November 2009, https://www.nij.gov/journals/264/Pages/solving.aspx.
2. Nancy Ritter, "Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains: The Nation's Silent Mass Disaster," *NIJ Journal* 256, January 2007, https://www.NIJ.gov/journals/256/Pages/missing-persons.aspx.
3. All numbers in this article are current as of February 2017. For the purposes of this article, cold cases are cases for which all significant investigative leads have been exhausted.
4. National Institute of Justice funding opportunity, "National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs)," grants.gov announcement number NIJ-2016-9079, posted March 4, 2016, https://NIJ.gov/funding/Documents/solicitations/NIJ-2016-9079.pdf.
5. National Institute of Justice funding opportunity, "Using DNA Technology to Identify the Missing," grants.gov announcement number NIJ-2015-4055, posted February 12, 2015, https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/SL001154.pdf.
6. The toll-free phone number for NamUs is 1-855-626-7600.
7. Visit the NamUs Spanish site at https://www.findthemissing.org/es.
8. Audie Cornish, interview with Todd Matthews, "Majority Of Missing Persons Cases Are Resolved," *All Things Considered,* NPR, May 7, 2013, http://www.npr.org/2013/05/07/182000622/majority-of-missing-persons-cases-are-resolved.
9. For more information on DNA services provided by the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner, see http://www1.nyc.gov/site/ocme/index.page.
10. For more information on the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification services, see http://www.untchi.org/.
11. For more information on the University of South Florida's missing persons services, such as the Art of Forensics program, see http://www.forensics.usf.edu/.
12. National Institute of Justice, "Using DNA Technology on Unidentified Individuals from New York City's Potter's Field," award to the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner, grant number 2009-DN-BX-K038.
13. For more information on the Dozier School for Boys project, see http://news.usf.edu/article/templates/?a=7173&z=224.
14. For more information on the Conference of Western Attorneys General's missing persons programs, see https://www.cwagweb.org/project/fsic-missing-persons-resource-center/.
15. Updated data will soon be available, as the Bureau of Justice Statistics intends to perform another census of medical examiners' and coroners' offices in 2018-2019.
16. S.B. 1066, Chapter 437 (Calif. 2014), https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201320140SB1066; and California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, *Missing Persons Investigations: Guidelines & Curriculum,* Sec. 14201.3, Information Accessibility (December 2011), http://lib.post.ca.gov/Publications/missing.pdf.
17. Connecticut: S.H.B. 6113, Public Act No. 11-102 (Conn. 2011); New York: S.B. A10278A/S07987A (New York 2016); and Tennessee: H.B. 0044/S.B. 0113 (Tenn. 2017).
18. Since 2000, there have been approximately 161 mass fatality incidents and almost 9,000 deaths.

Image source: Photographee.eu, Shutterstock.

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