

How to Tackle the Nation's Missing Persons Challenge

By Erin H. Kimmerle, Thomas C. McAndrew and James Markey | September 1, 2017

On any given day in the United States, there are close to 100,000 active missing persons entries in the FBI's [National Crime Information Center](#) (NCIC) database.

Approximately 4,400 unidentified human remains will be recovered every year, on top of the 40,000 that currently exist nationally.

These numbers are only estimates, because there has not been a national endeavor to locate and track unidentified decedents from years past. Many of these cases slipped through the cracks because they either were never entered in NCIC or investigative efforts ended prematurely—or both—which means that many victims have been cremated or are lying in unmarked graves.

These long-term cases are often fraught with errors, as science and investigative methods have changed over the decades. The degree to which old cases are updated to current standards is highly variable across jurisdictions.

This has generated an enormous problem: The number of missing and unidentified persons is beyond the capability of the majority of law enforcement and medical examiners/coroners to identify these individuals and reunite them with their families.

In order to help solve these cases, there are a number of tools and resources in place, but one of the most effective is the federally funded program called [NamUs](#), which provides an invaluable, free resource that has been proven to work.

NamUs, an acronym for the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, operated by the National Institute of Justice, is a resource center housing a database of missing persons and unidentified decedent records across the U.S.

It comprises three databases: The Missing Persons Database, the Unidentified Persons Database and the Unclaimed Persons Database.

In addition to being a data clearing-house, NamUs provides free forensic and analytical resources for missing, unidentified and unclaimed person cases. It's a free online system that can be searched by medical examiners, coroners, law enforcement officials and the general public (including victim's families) from all over the country in hopes of resolving these cases.

When a new missing person or unidentified decedent case is entered into NamUs, the system automatically performs cross-matching comparisons between the databases, searching for matches or similarities among cases. The system also has an advanced search feature that allows for public users as well as law enforcement, medical examiners and coroners to locate potential

matches based on unique features, such as scars, marks, tattoos, jewelry, skeletal or biometric information, and other physical descriptions.

But the system can accomplish so much more if it is used to its fullest potential.

Currently, the use of this tool is voluntary. In Florida, for example the NCIC lists 3,233 missing persons and 783 unidentified persons. However, the NamUs system reports only 1,086 missing cases and exceeds NCIC with 870 unidentified person's cases.

These cases will only be solved if we know who we are looking for and if all available resources and tools are deployed to ensure each case has its best chance at being solved.

Many medical examiner and coroner's offices around the country do not have access to NCIC. Having an online database is therefore crucial. The public user interface brings awareness and rejuvenates cold cases for possible new leads. It provides free resources and services for cases in NamUs that would not otherwise be available to some agencies.

The public user interface is also a successful tool for families searching for their loved ones based on unique characteristics. The different access levels for public and criminal justice personnel allow for detailed investigative notes and the results of forensic analysis to be hidden from public view.

It offers internet accessibility and ease of use for all users as it streamlines case management by serving as a single source for all case information and digital images. Comprehensive case reports and Missing Person Posters are accessible to print out and customized per user type. Geo-mapping helps to find the closest resources available. Geo-mapping is also available for cases that are returned as a result of an advanced search.

And it's cost-efficient.

Some have argued that this tool creates a burden for busy and resource-strapped investigators. But it is actually a tool that helps save time and money by solving cases. The free resources available include training on how to use NamUs and technical support for adding entries.

NamUs is currently undergoing a re-build/upgrade into the NamUs 2.0 system. The upgrade will have a mechanism to allow for data exchange between agencies and in some instances even state databases. Data exchange between NamUs and NCIC is prohibited by federal legislation that the FBI must follow with regard to the data contained in the NCIC system.

Therefore, the only current way to ensure effective use of the NamUs Program – for all users to help solve cases—is for each agency to enter its own cases. NCIC data is limited in nature compared to NamUs data fields and therefore a case will still need enhancements once imported from NCIC.

These barriers need to be addressed. All law enforcement agencies and medical examiners/coroners should be required by law and/or state policy to use NamUs for long-term Missing and Unidentified individuals.

New York, Ohio, Connecticut, and Tennessee already have state laws requiring the use of NamUs. California's Penal Code states that the clearinghouse *must* share data with NamUs. There are similar proposals in other states as well, but all state legislatures should be concerned that missing- and unidentified-persons cases have their best chance at being solved.

At a minimum, effective legislation should require:

- that human remains of unknown unidentified persons are not destroyed (i.e. cremated);
- that biometric data is collected and tested to aid with identification; and
- that the NamUs entries be mandatory.

Furthermore, in regards to long-term missing person cases, law enforcement should be required to obtain family reference samples for entry into the national DNA database.

If the systems that have been put in place are used to their fullest potential, the unidentified stand a much better chance of being given back their name.

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