



# NamUs *National Missing and Unidentified Persons System*



## NamUs Background



Although the problem of missing persons and unidentified human remains in this country has existed for a long time, significant progress has been made in recent years. In 2003, the [DNA Initiative](#) was launched. The Office of Justice Program's (OJP) National Institute of Justice (NIJ) began funding major efforts to maximize the use of DNA technology in our criminal justice system. Much of NIJ's work has focused on developing tools to investigate and solve the cases of missing persons and unidentified decedents.

The National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) databases are just one element of a broader program to improve the nation's capacity to address these cases. For example, NIJ also funds free testing of unidentified human remains and provides family reference-sample kits, at no charge, to any jurisdiction in the country. Other efforts include training law enforcement officers, medical examiners, judges, and attorneys on forensic DNA evidence.

In the spring of 2005, NIJ assembled federal, state, and local law enforcement officials, medical examiners and coroners, forensic scientists, key policymakers, and victim advocates and families from around the country for a national strategy meeting in Philadelphia. The meeting, called the "Identifying the Missing Summit," defined major challenges in investigating and solving missing persons and unidentified decedent cases. As a result of that summit, the Deputy Attorney General charged the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) with identifying every available tool—and creating others—to solve these cases. The National Missing Persons Task Force identified the need to improve access to database information by people who can help solve missing persons and unidentified decedent cases. NamUs was created to meet that need.

The NamUs reporting and searching system will improve the quantity and quality of—and access to—data on missing persons and unidentified human remains. Through NamUs, a diverse community of criminal justice professionals, medical examiners and coroners, victim advocates, families of missing persons, and the general public now can contribute to solving these cases.

## How Big Is the Problem?

It has been estimated that there are approximately 40,000 unidentified human remains in the offices of the nation's medical examiners and coroners or were buried or cremated before being identified (see [Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains: The Nation's Silent Mass Disaster](#)). In June 2007, OJP's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) confirmed that, in a typical year, medical examiners and coroners handle approximately 4,400 unidentified human decedent cases, 1,000 of which remain unidentified after one year. (See the [Medical Examiners and Coroners' Offices, 2004](#) for the full report.)

BJS further identified the need to improve record-retention policies. As of 2004, more than half (51 percent) of the nation's medical examiners' offices had no policy for retaining records—such as x-rays, DNA, or fingerprints—on unidentified human decedents. BJS also noted, however, that more than 90 percent of offices servicing large jurisdictions did have such a policy.

To further investigate the extent of the problem—and viable solutions—NIJ assembled an expert panel of medical examiners and coroners. The expert panel found that the primary—and overwhelming—need was for a central reporting system for unidentified human remains.

As NIJ investigated the challenges of missing persons and unidentified decedent cases, another problem was more fully revealed: the reporting of missing persons' cases. Cases of missing persons 18 years old and younger must be reported, but reporting adult missing persons cases is voluntary. Only a handful of states have laws that require law enforcement agencies to prepare missing person reports on adults. Overall, there is a low rate of reporting these cases through the National Crime Information Center (NCIC). One of the major goals of NamUs is to meet this challenge. For example, NamUs will work with state clearinghouses and the public to ensure that data is included in NamUs and other national-level databases.

### **NamUs Milestones**

Through NamUs, users will have access to two databases: [Unidentified Decedents](#) database and [Missing Persons](#) database. NamUs has three phases:

#### **Phase 1 (July–September 2007)**

- Complete creation of the national database of [unidentified decedent](#) records, which will allow searches based on characteristics such as demographics, anthropologic analysis, dental information, and distinct body features.
- Begin functional and technical design of the national online [missing persons](#) database.
- Finalize nationwide resources on missing persons, including a central access point for information on State clearinghouses, medical examiners' and coroners' offices, victim's assistance resources, and legislation.
- Begin study to examine the legal ramifications of privacy laws and their impact on public access to information on missing persons.

#### **Phase II (October 2007–September 2008)**

- Develop a national online missing persons database to enhance reporting, investigating, and solving missing persons cases.

#### **Phase III (2009)**

- Release fully searchable NamUs system, which will search cases in the missing persons database against cases in the unidentified decedents database in an effort to identify unidentified human remains and solve missing persons cases.

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