

INTRODUCTION

- As a new epicenter of migrant death, Maverick County, TX (Figure 1) experienced an average of one death per day in the summer of 2022.
- Overwhelmed and with broken storage facilities, the county began burying the deceased without carrying out identification efforts (Figure 2).
- Negative media coverage led to the county seeking assistance from Texas State University's Operation Identification (OpID).

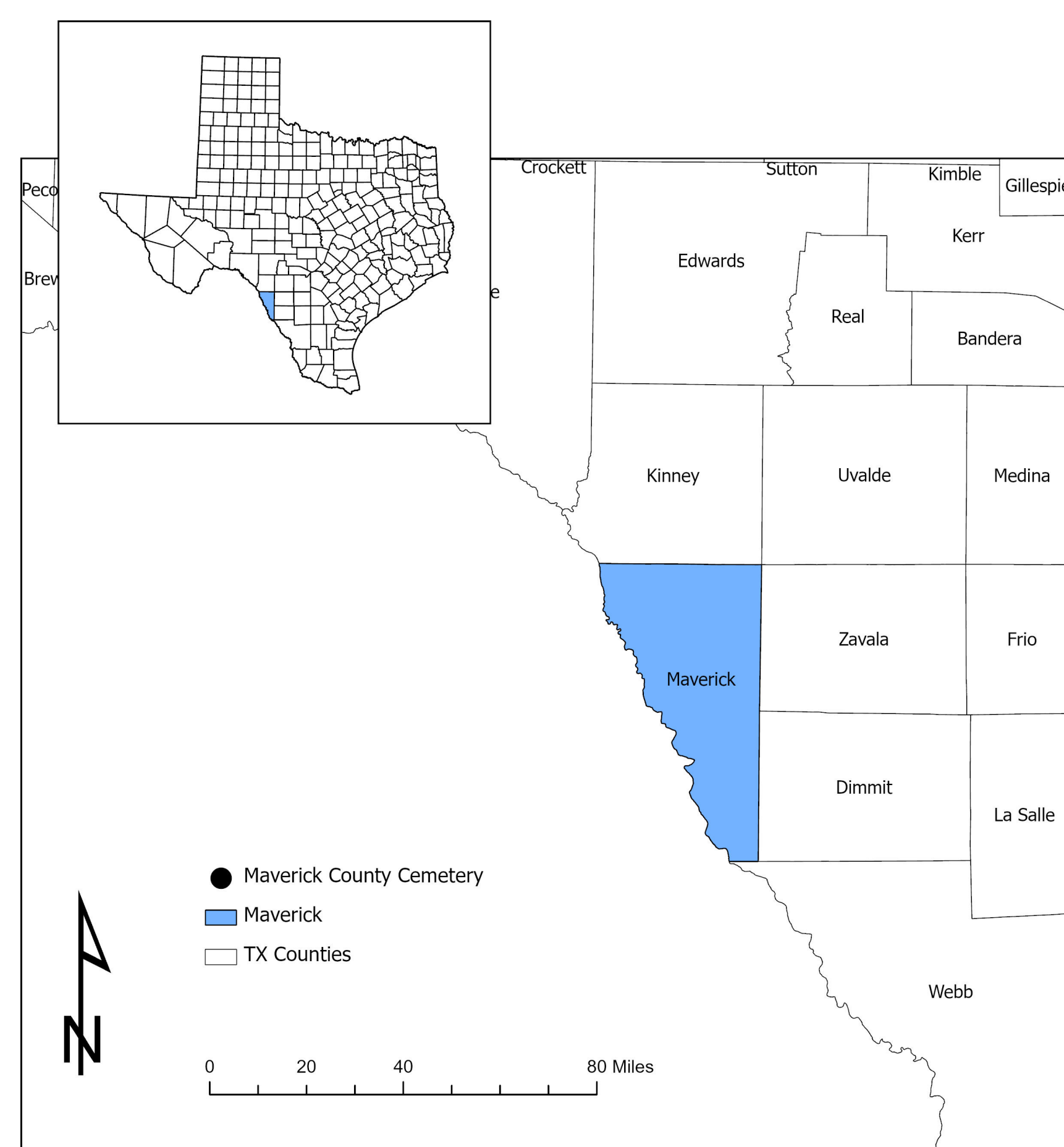


Figure 1: Maverick County, TX in blue.

METHODS

- In November 2022 OpID conducted pedestrian and geophysical survey at the Maverick County Cemetery using GPR, resistivity, and drone imaging.
- OpID exhumed 26 individuals over the course of two forensic excavations in November 2022 (n=7) and January 2023 (n=19) (Figure 3).
- Because the county lacked case records, OpID linked the deceased to case numbers from personal effects and photographs (Figure 4) provided by Border Patrol's Missing Migrant Program. Information on grave markers (Figure 5) did not correspond to associated burials.

RESULTS

- All 26 individuals died between June and September 2022.
- 13 of the 26 individuals have strong identification hypotheses from ID cards and case circumstances.
- To date, 7 of the individuals have been positively identified from Nicaragua, Honduras, Venezuela, Mexico, and Syria.

SUMMARY

The immediate burial of the recently deceased in Maverick County has greatly hindered identification efforts. Texas border counties need access to DVI facilities, personnel, and procedures.



Figure 2: White crosses made of wood and PVC pipe mark the graves of the unidentified.



Figure 3: Forensic excavations.

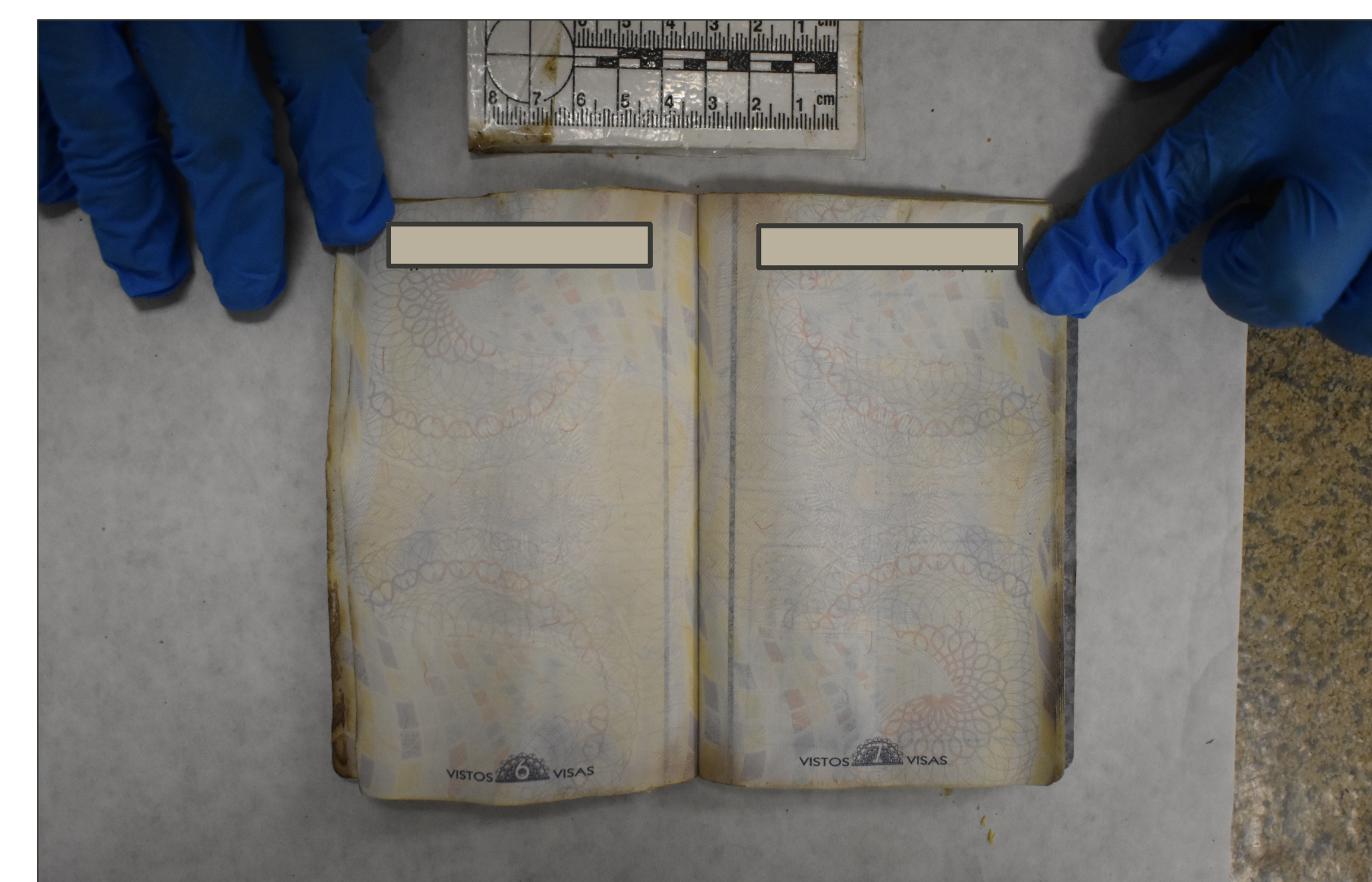


Figure 4: Passport recovered with a decedent.

DISCUSSION

- The response to rapidly bury the deceased has greatly hindered identification through the loss of case information and the destruction of evidence.
- At least two individuals were buried prior to positive fingerprint matches and are now having to be identified via DNA. Nearly all individuals were visually recognizable when first found.

CONCLUSIONS

- Border counties lacking a medical examiner need access to disaster victim identification (DVI) services, especially when cause and manner of death are readily apparent (most victims had drowned in the river), and identification is the primary concern.
- The illegality of burying unidentified persons without investigation should be enforced.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- OpID is now working with Maverick County to ensure no new burials occur without proper identification efforts.
- OpID and partners are currently surveying other western Texas border counties to generate migrant death counts and promote best forensic practices.
- OpID and partners are working to develop DVI centers throughout the Texas border region.



Figure 5. Temporary grave marker. Information typically did not correspond to the remains.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the HHRRC, the NIJ, the Forensic Border Coalition (FBC), the South Texas Human Rights Center, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, the University of Indianapolis, and to all Texas State University students and faculty who have participated in OpID. This work would also not be possible without the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Office of the Governor of the State of Texas.