

Completion and Utilization of a DNA Database for kinship-based identifications of Children separated from their families during El Salvador's Civil War.

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During El Salvador's violent civil war from 1980 to 1992 many children were forcibly removed from their families, some taken in by military families or top military officials, or sent to orphanages to be adopted around the world. Since 1994 the non-governmental organization Asociación Pro-Búsqueda (Pro-Search Association) de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos (of Disappeared Children) has been investigating these disappearances and reuniting families torn asunder by the war.

This presentation chronicles the ongoing collaboration between Pro-Búsqueda, Physicians for Human Rights, The U.C. Berkeley Human Rights Center, and volunteer scientists in the United States and Canada to develop a novel DNA based approach identifying these missing children. The approach is similar to kinship based mass-disaster identification efforts, where one database of DNA profiles from missing persons is searched against a database of DNA profiles collected from their possible families. Tentative identifications are more closely examined utilizing kinship calculations within the Human Identification software package DNA•View. Kinship analysis results can be integrated with available investigative information for possible identifications. Alternatively, these results may provide the impetus for a completely new investigation. This approach is novel because the DNA analysis provided new investigative leads rather than serve only as a confirmatory technique at the end of the investigation.

The project has been a resounding success with several notable achievements. Pro-Búsqueda staff interviewed over 400 families and collected over 800 DNA samples. Volunteer scientists typed the DNA samples, constructed the DNA database, uncovered two new tentative identifications from a mass-disaster style screen, and performed kinship analysis on these two families. As originally planned, the DNA database has been provided to Pro-Búsqueda. Pro-Búsqueda maintains ownership of the database and will use it for their investigations in collaboration with their colleagues abroad.

The project now transitions into its next phase. This will include the collection and typing of more DNA samples, re-analysis of samples to confirm identifications, searching for more possible missing children, and the retention of a DNA expert in El Salvador to assist Pro-Búsqueda in their continued investigations.