

OSAC REVIEW SPRING 2025 (OSAC = Organization of Scientific Area Committees)

NAME OSAC UPDATE #27: OSAC 2021-N-0008 (OSAC Proposed)

Victim Accounting: Best Practice Recommendations for Medicolegal Authorities in Mass Fatality Management

This Standard was developed by the Disaster Victim Identification Task Group of the Medicolegal Death Investigation Subcommittee of OSAC. It has been submitted to a standards development organization and may change as it undergoes revisions in that consensus-based process.

(Like all OSAC developed Standards, Best Practices, and Guides, these are voluntary and separate from NAME standards and accreditation.)

*This is a brief summary of OSAC 2021-N-0008, and as such may leave out or misinterpret important details. **See link to full document (below).***

Value:

Victim Accounting: Best Practice Recommendations for Medicolegal Authorities in Mass Fatality Management provides guidance in accounting as part of the process of victim identification, and in incidents involving fragmented remains. Accurate reporting of the number of fatalities is expected by the public, media, and officials. The document could be used as a reference or be fully incorporated into a Medical Examiner MFI plan. As a best practice document, recommendations (and not requirements) are provided.

Scope:

Includes recommendations for accounting for fragmented remains, reconciling unaccounted for persons lists, and reporting fatalities (identified, unidentified, and unclaimed).

Definitions:

Group Remains: “Unidentified human remains that are not examined beyond the initial triage due to the tissue lacking all potentially identifiable

characteristics or yielding no information useful to death investigation and determination of incident causation.”

Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI): “The fewest number of individuals represented in a skeletal assemblage.”

Recommendations:

- The simplest accounting is in mass fatality events without fragmented remains, having a closed population, where a whiteboard or computer matching program may be adequate.
- In an open population incident, the number of unaccounted for persons may be higher than the true number of fatalities. Historical data indicates that for every true victim, 10 persons will attempt to report them as unaccounted for.
- Fragmentation of remains makes both closed and open population mass fatality accounting more difficult, due to the need to process each identifiable fragment, and resource limitations in identification.
- In a closed population with fragmentation it may be acceptable to account for each victim, and engage families in disposition of grouped remains.
- In an open mass fatality with fragmentation, some victims may not have been reported as missing or identified during examinations so the number of fatalities is an estimate.
- It is recommended that persons believed to be involved in a mass fatality incident be termed “unaccounted for persons”, until they are identified as a confirmed fatality, or survivor. The term “missing person” should be avoided due to the implications of “missing person” for law enforcement.
- Medicolegal authorities should work with all partner agencies (such as law enforcement, and hospitals) to establish a way to collate various lists into a single unaccounted for persons manifest.
- A central reporting mechanism for unaccounted for persons, such as a dedicated call center, is advantageous. Electronic reporting systems

are emerging, including a recently released NamUS module for such incidents that incorporated a web-based form for the public.

- As remains are examined, the terms Identified, unidentified, and unclaimed are recommended. (Unclaimed is used when next of kin cannot be located, or the family has declined to arrange for disposition.) When remains are fragmented, the unidentified may already be represented in the identified population, affecting the reporting of numbers of fatalities.
- In mass fatality incidents the media and elected officials may seek information on the number of fatalities almost immediately. In open mass fatality events such estimates, often made by non-official sources, can vary widely and are usually inaccurate. Medicolegal authorities should refrain from providing such estimates.
- In some states, the death record now contains a field allowing assignment of a death to a specific incident. Judgement and discretion are important in determining the manner of death, as it can have implications in emergency funding, life insurance policies, etc. (See NAME position paper: Recommendations for the Documentation and Certification of Disaster-Related Deaths, 2022)
- Reporting fatality numbers is the responsibility of the medicolegal authority. The number of fatalities, and victim accounting procedures, should be provided to family members prior to the media or officials.
- It is recommended that the Medicolegal Authority or designee be present at press conferences to address questions about fatality management and victim accounting.

Full Document:

<https://www.nist.gov/document/osac-2021-n-0008victim-accounting-best-practice-recommendationsfinal-osac-proposed-standard>