



## Anthropology Section - 2015

---

### **A35 A Comparative Study of Human Decomposition Research Facilities in the United States: The Role of “Body Farms” in Forensic Applications**

*Nicole S. Klein, MA\*, 2935 Alaska Street, Baton Rouge, LA 70802*

---

After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the importance of human decomposition research facilities as well as the perceptions associated with them, within the forensic community as a whole.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing, for the first time, an all-encompassing look at how human decomposition facilities are started, what they are used for, how their utilization may have changed since their inception, and what their role is in the future of forensic anthropology. This overview will in turn open up dialogue so the benefits of these facilities may be fully realized by the forensic science community, scholars, and the public as a whole.

The first human decomposition facility, the University of Tennessee’s Anthropological Research Facility, or the “Body Farm,” as it is more commonly known, was established in 1980. Not until 2006 did another of its kind open and in the past six years, the number of such facilities has tripled. Human decomposition facilities, and their amenities, are being used for research purposes more frequently each year, although there is little in the literature that describes the facilities themselves.

Interviews with facility representatives were used to gather data in order to better understand how these facilities are initiated, the difficulties and successes that come with such a facility, and their uses beyond decomposition research. Also, surveys were distributed to forensic professionals (including physical anthropologists) in the American Academy of Forensic Sciences and to university students to understand perceptions on the utilization and usefulness of human decomposition facilities and what place they have in the future of forensic sciences.

Results show that the majority of those involved in the forensic sciences, and especially forensic anthropology, find that human decomposition facilities provide vital research opportunities. Based on both interview and survey responses, more human decomposition facilities should be established in unique climate regions, in order to better understand decomposition rates. Also, individuals affiliated with facilities that are already established intend to continue collaboration with one another, to extend research opportunities to other departments and universities, and to expand their own research goals. Finally, the perceptions of non-forensic professionals (as represented by university students) regarding both human decomposition facilities and the role of forensic anthropology appear to be influenced by the popular media.

In order to realize the full potential of these facilities, their representatives and others who utilize them must continue to provide factual information and publishable material to counter misconceptions that are so readily provided by media culture. The human decomposition facility provides a unique opportunity for research, training purposes, and hands-on experience for all who use them. Their continuation is vital to better understanding taphonomic changes, thereby assisting in a medicolegal context.

---

#### **Human Decomposition, Body Farms, Forensic Anthropology**