POPULATION AND GEOGRAPHY OF SAN DIEGO COUNTY

The County of San Diego is the fifth most populous in the United States, with a population greater than 20 of the 50 states. The total population of the county has grown at a rate between 1-1.5% per year. Nearly half of the more than 3 million people who live in the county reside within the city of San Diego, with the remainder in smaller cities and towns, reservations, or unincorporated areas. Most of the urban regions are concentrated along the coast and freeway corridors, while there are many rural areas and large expanses of undeveloped open terrain in the eastern portions of the county.

San Diego County is unique in its geographic diversity. Our area of 4,526 square miles includes 70 miles of coastline and 86 miles of the U.S.-Mexico international border. The county includes impressively diverse features such as forested mountains, deserts, beaches, bays, wetlands, rivers, lakes, canyons, and mesas. These natural features are, of course, an important part of understanding the variety and range of sudden and unexpected deaths in our community.

With such variety, the county has numerous microclimates. As a whole, we have an average annual high temperature of 70°F. While coastal areas have one of the mildest climates in the continental United States, inland areas experience more variety: in the summer, some areas may experience temperatures above 100°F, or, the winter may have temperatures falling well below freezing.

The San Diego County Medical Examiner deals with many deaths of the types expected in any jurisdiction with a large urban and rural population, such as those from motor vehicle accidents, natural causes, alcohol or drug-related causes, or homicidal violence. In addition, the

great variety of terrain, microclimates, and geography result in an even wider range of cases seen at our office.

Temperature extremes, in combination with the rugged terrain of many inland areas, are strongly tied to the deaths of undocumented persons crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border. Elevated temperatures may lead to dehydration or hyperthermia; low temperatures may lead to hypothermia; and in any season, the terrain may lead to exhaustion or getting lost. Proximity to the international border also increases the numbers of cases of less-common infectious diseases, particularly tuberculosis.

Drownings may occur in our oceans, lakes, or rivers, as well as swimming pools. In addition to swimmers, drownings may involve scuba divers, persons trapped in flooding waters, or those involved in boating accidents. Because of our thriving seaport, the Medical Examiner may also have jurisdiction on deaths occurring on a boat or ship at sea when it makes port. Deaths involving attacks by marine life do occur, but are extremely rare, averaging less than one every 20 years.

Deaths due to falls may occur in urban areas from buildings, from our local bridges, or from mountain and beach cliffs. Cliff collapses have contributed to other deaths as well.

The variety presented by our unique environment is ever-growing and always challenging. The size of our jurisdiction, and its numerous remote areas, can be an obstacle for responding to a death scene and retrieving remains, much less providing a thorough death investigation. Nonetheless, your San Diego Medical Examiner's Office rises to that challenge.