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Forensic scientists are generally whiter, less diverse than US population they serve, study says



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A yearlong study examining ethnic and racial diversity in forensic science has found that the varying disciplines, which frequently work closely with law enforcement, are also generally whiter than the U.S. population it serves.

The report, published Thursday in Forensic Science International: Synergy, is one of only a few that have looked at the relative representation of people of color in forensic science-related fields today. After an early energetic debate among the future authors, they quickly discovered one reason why so little had been done on the subject: There is next to no good data.

Even forensic-related professional organizations like the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) or the National Association of Medical Examiners that could easily survey its membership and disclose demographics, don't report statistics on its racial and ethnic makeup, the report notes.

The study states it was forced to focus on larger datasets for fields such as psychology or pathology, which include forensics; or census data that's not always about forensics-related jobs and therefore muddied; or data from an outside career and job search platform that couldn't be independently verified. The study notes

it also was unable to account for an entire group of individuals who didn't self-identify as one race.

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The findings highlighted large disparities between the general U.S. population and those working in these social science- or science-related fields. By and large, those who identified as Asian were overrepresented across most forensic science-related jobs, except as specialized psychologists. But individuals identifying as Black, Hispanic and Indigenous were largely underrepresented across the board.

Andrea Roth, a Berkeley Law professor whose research focuses on the use of forensic science in criminal trials and reviewed the study at USA TODAY's request, said its efforts to roughly identify the numbers of African American forensic odontologists by looking at African American dentists, for example, likely means that the actual diversity numbers are even worse. That's because dentistry was an already established professional path in the 20th century for African Americans — and they might be less interested in assisting law enforcement investigations given understandable historic distrust.

The study notes that forensic science has historically framed itself as being "objective," but that is largely a myth, which has in and of itself discouraged people of color from participating. Roth explains that this is because science in general has been used to entrench ideas of race.

Roth notes that some "biometric" techniques had their beginnings in racism or eugenics to try to identify "criminal" or "abnormal" biological attributes. The man sometimes called the father of fingerprinting, Sir Francis Galton, is known for being an unapologetic racist, among other examples, Roth added.

"That doesn't mean that modern forensic techniques are racist," Roth said. "But there is a history there that might explain some cultural trends in terms of how the discipline developed and its interaction with culture and society."

While limited in nature, the report still aims to get at the broader consequences of an overall lack of diversity.

Close relationship forensic scientists have with law enforcement

Unless there is greater diversity in the field, much of the technology being developed maybe without thinking about the impacts on people of color, said An-Di Yim, a forensic anthropologist and assistant professor at Truman State University in Missouri and lead author of the paper.

She noted that DNA technology that builds out what a face might look like may not account for the natural gradient in skin colors and the fact that race is often a complex, socially constructed and self-identifying attribute – not just linked to skin color, as it is in the U.S.

The study also notes the close relationship forensic scientists have with law enforcement and the disproportionate number of people of color in forensic DNA databases, "which mirrors the disproportionate number of BIPOC individuals in the criminal justice system" and may further add to distrust of the system.

"Especially because forensic science is so police adjacent, whatever lack of diversity is contributing to what's happening in law enforcement," said Yim, referencing reports on systemic racism, "I'd say there's a huge parallel."

A 2011 study found that less than 15% of the AAFS membership self-identified as being a member of a minority group, based on gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. A more recent study this year found the AAFS anthropology section to be at least 87% white, but only a third of it took surveys and many of those who did were students.

LACK OF DIVERSITY HINDERS SEARCHES: Could DNA tests bring home missing kids?

Fewer people of color in the world of forensics means they are likely to play less of a role in helping craft key privacy provisions around the future of familial DNA searches, an effort that is ongoing amid that professional community and state legislatures, Roth said. It's an area of science that has had a disproportionately high impact on communities of color given the greater numbers of Black and brown individuals already in law enforcement DNA databases.

The study also found that of the 104 U.S. schools the Education Department classifies as "historically Black colleges and universities," only 13, or 12.5% offer forensic science-related programming – and less than half offer a bachelor's or certificate in forensic science. Of the 46 U.S. programs accredited by the Forensic Science Education Programs Accreditation Commission, the study noted only two are at an HBCU.

'You don’t want to have blind spots'

The study did find that students in the 2020 class of college graduates who identified as Hispanic were "well-represented" in forensic science and technology, as well as forensic psychology.

Mark Barash, an assistant professor and forensic science program coordinator at San Jose State University, said that while diversity conceptually is very important, it's always best to simply ensure workers are qualified regardless of their background. Barash believes the ideal way to address underrepresentation is by helping educate the new generation of students from these communities and help them gain the same chances those from overrepresented populations might have.

The authors advocated for more active reporting around diversity and inclusion from forensic science organizations to better study the issue in the future. They also noted the need for more effective strategies for recruitment, retention, and promotion, as well as mentorship — at least once there is more data and it is better understood.

Max Houck, a forensic anthropologist and the editor-in-chief of the forensic science journal that published the study, told USA TODAY that he believes such diversity is crucial to forensic science-related professions because 98% of the workforce is made up of civil servants, and it makes sense for them to represent the populations they are serving.

"You're looking for a group of people that may not agree but can come to agreements," Houck said. "You don't want to be surrounded by people who are exactly like you, or you tend to solve problems the same way. From an organizational perspective, it’s not good."

He added: "You don’t want to have blind spots and you certainly would if you had an all-white all-male forensic lab."

Tami Abdollah is a USA TODAY national correspondent covering inequities in the criminal justice system. Send tips via direct message @latams or email tami(at)usatoday.com