

Study finds field of forensic anthropology lacks diversity

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The field of forensic anthropology is a relatively homogenous discipline in terms of diversity (people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with mental and physical disabilities, etc.) and this is highly problematic for the field of study and for most forensic anthropologists.

At the core of the forensic sciences are basic sciences and the STEM fields, which have struggled with increasing diversity and inclusion. The

lack of diversity in the STEM fields and the forensic sciences is concerning because it can limit the types of questions being asked in research.

"As forensic practitioners, we do not reflect the demographics of the highly dynamic populations that we serve across the country. Relevant and successful research relies on a diversity of ideas, perspectives and experiences, and without such diversity, the field stagnates and does not keep up with important issues that are relevant to society," explained corresponding author Sean Tallman, Ph.D., RPA, assistant professor of anatomy and neurobiology at Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM).

In order to explore the demographics of the forensic anthropological community and perceptions of diversity and inclusion, an [anonymous survey](#) was sent out to the Anthropology Section of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS), which included more than 500 individuals. The survey consisted of 48 questions that asked about demographic information; whether participants believe that diversity exists in various educational contexts; their experience with diversity, inclusion, and harassment at the AAFS annual meetings; and what the field could do to increase diversity and inclusion.

The data then was analyzed for trends in order to propose actionable measures that could produce meaningful change that positively impacts diversity and inclusion in forensic [anthropology](#). According to the researchers they found many [forensic anthropologists](#) had experienced or witnessed discriminatory behavior within the AAFS, which is the scientific society that most forensic practitioners maintain membership in the U.S. "Problematically, many individuals in forensic anthropology do not know how to report incidents of discrimination or harassment that occur at the AAFS," added Tallman.

While the discipline has been slow to address issues of diversity, inclusion and discrimination, Tallman believes the field can mitigate these issues through regular tracking of membership demographics by the AAFS, reassessing graduate admission requirements and indicators of success, creating mechanisms for reporting discrimination and harassment, targeted outreach, and developing mentorship opportunities.

"Striving for a culture of diversity through inclusion in forensic anthropology helps to reflect the greater populations that we serve and encourages us to challenge our own assumptions and inherent biases that can complicate the analysis of skeletal remains in forensic casework. Diversity and inclusion initiatives should be substantial and well-supported, rather than merely token gestures to increase the number of minorities or underrepresented groups."

More information: Sean D. Tallman and Cate E. Bird. Diversity and Inclusion in Forensic Anthropology: Where We Stand and Prospects for the Future. *Forensic Anthropology*. Vol. 3 No. 1 (2020): Winter 2020

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