Forensic researchers call for proactive efforts to address racism
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Forensic researchers are calling for the research community to be more proactive about addressing systemic racism in the sciences—currently and historically—in order to address longstanding issues related to how Black people and their remains are treated by museum collections and society at large.

"The Black Lives Matter movement has called attention to systemic racism in a variety of contexts—including the way the remains of Black people have been collected, displayed and studied in museums and research collections," says Ann Ross, co-author of a paper on the subject and a professor of biological sciences at North Carolina State University. "As forensic researchers who make use of these skeletal collections, we think this is an opportunity for us to encourage difficult conversations about these collections and what a path forward may look like."

Skeletal collections serve as important resources for training forensic and biological anthropologists. They are also valuable sources of data used in a wide variety of anthropological research, helping us understand human societies and human biological variation over time.

However, many of these collections include skeletal remains that were collected without consent, under ethically dubious circumstances, or to advance explicitly racist anthropological theories.

"These are all things that we need to account for and address today," Ross says.

One of the key questions that needs to be asked is what should be done with the remains that are in these collections.

"In almost every case, we know the names of the people whose remains are found in skeletal collections," Ross says. "We think it is important for institutions to engage with relevant descendants, stakeholders and communities to determine whether the remains should be repatriated and interred. This is particularly important in instances where there was no clear consent given for the remains to be added to collections.

"Skeletal collections are tremendously important to our field and our work—there is no doubt about that. But descendant communities need to have a voice here."

The researchers argue that the anthropology community also has a larger obligation.

"We need to insist on uncomfortable conversations and openly encourage criticism on issues related to race," Ross says. "If we are not proactively engaging with these issues—both publicly and within our discipline—it will be impossible to build or maintain trust in our institutions and our work."

The paper is published in The Anatomical Record.

More information: Shanna E. Williams et al, Ethical dilemmas in skeletal collection utilization:

Provided by North Carolina State University