

## A103 Terminology Used to Describe Human Variation in Forensic Anthropology

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**Learning Overview:** After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the terminology that has been used to describe skeletal human variation in the *Journal of Forensic Sciences (JFS)* between 1972 and 2020.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic science community by quantifying terminology to understand temporal trends in forensic anthropological research on human variation and how this terminology is relevant to resolving missing persons cases.

Biological anthropology has long studied human variation over time and in extant populations. In forensic anthropology, this work has included estimations of what is now typically called “ancestry.” This work has been subjected to criticism from other scholars within anthropology, but has been defended as being necessary to resolve missing persons cases. The goal of this research is to examine the use of terminology within forensic anthropology over time and align that with data on missing persons and the United States census to evaluate the importance of that data within a medicolegal context.

To evaluate terminology usage over time, this study evaluated articles in the *JFS* from 1972 to 2020 ( $n=11,305$ ). Within these articles, this study identified those that used any relevant term (e.g., race, ancestry, White, Black;  $n=836$ ), and further winnowed the data to only those that were of anthropological interest ( $n=360$ ). Terminology was placed into two categories: classifiers and descriptors. Classifiers include the term authors used to describe their broad categories. These were standardized into one of five options: “race,” “ancestry,” “population,” “ethnic,” or “other.” Descriptors included terms used to describe individuals within these classificatory terms. Descriptors were standardized in terms of word order, capitalization, and hyphenation (e.g., African-American and African American, or American White and White American). These data were also compared with terminology and data kept by the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) as well as the United States census to understand how terms in forensic anthropology are relevant to resolving missing persons cases.

For classifiers, “race” was the most prevalent, found in 42.4% of articles, followed by “ancestry” (30.6%), “population” (14.6%), “ethnic” (7.6%), and “other” (4.8%). A total of 160 distinct descriptors were identified, 98 of which appear only once in the articles analyzed (e.g., “mixed race,” “trihybrid,” “Latino”), many of which are considered offensive terms to use. Of the remaining 62 that were used in at least two different articles, the most commonly used descriptors (>2%) were “White” (16.0%), “Black” (13.8%), “American Black” (5.5%), “American White” (5.3%), “European” (4.5%), “Hispanic” (3.0%), “Native American” (2.9%), “Caucasian” (2.7%), “African” (2.6%), “African American” (2.4%), “American Indian” (2.1%), and “Asian” (2.2). Temporal trends show a peak in these types of articles in the 1990s and mid-2000s. While “race” was used early on, the terms “ancestry” and “population” have become more common in the past 30 years.

The NamUs database does not use the same terminology seen in *JFS*, illustrating a disconnect in the terms used to identify the missing and unidentified with those used in anthropological research. There are also biases in the data of the missing in terms of age and sex that are not echoed in the data of the unidentified, which could indicate deficiencies in these estimations of the biological profile. There is a bias in terms of race/ethnicity of the missing and unidentified and the United States census data. While “White” individuals make up 72.4% of the United States population, they only constitute 50.3% of the missing and 29.4% of the unidentified. “Black/African Americans” comprise 12.6% of the population and make up 18.6% of the missing and 13.9% of the unidentified.

In this review, it is clear that there are differences in the terminology used in forensic anthropology and that used in the census and missing-persons reports. Further, refining methods for sex and age estimation may also help significantly in resolving missing persons cases, as illustrated in the NamUs data. It is important for forensic anthropologists to be cognizant of the terms they use in medicolegal contexts, publications, and in public and/or professional spaces. The continued use of misrepresentative and improper language further marginalizes groups and perpetuates oppression rooted in systemic racism. Acknowledgement of prior wrongs and proper use of terminology will serve to improve our science and discipline.

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### Ancestry, Race, Language