



Young Forensic Scientists Forum Posters – 2021

Y6 Racial Bias and Missing Persons Investigations

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how racial biases cloud the investigation of missing persons cases.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating that racial biases have been documented in the investigation of missing persons cases and that investigations of unidentified decedents do not always proceed equitably.

Racial bias permeates policing practices, investigative efforts, and the criminal justice system in variety of ways. For example, there is copious evidence that demonstrates that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) are disproportionately treated during encounters with the police, whether those encounters be relatively benign (i.e., waiting on word that your missing child has been recovered) or confrontational (i.e., during arrest). Copious data demonstrate the results of such racial bias from BIPOC communities having a higher police presence, to disproportionate levels of arrest, violence, and death at the hands of police against Black people (especially men) vs. White people. Such bias even extends to the way BIPOC children are treated: arrested children are disproportionately Black and are sentenced as adults at a higher rate than White children defendants, and missing children are recovered faster when they are White. Women are not immune either; as one example, the epidemic of sex trafficking and assault against Native American women and girls goes relatively underinvestigated. Further, research has demonstrated that violence at the hands of law enforcement directed against Black people (to include children) is associated with a worldview of Black inferiority.

Biases have also been documented in investigative efforts related to missing persons cases where the social phenomenon of “missing White woman syndrome” shapes the exposure, engagement, and awareness of the public in relation to people who are missing. Although a growing body of literature establishes a notable racial disparity in the news coverage of missing individuals in the United States, much less is known regarding the impact this has on the investigation of missing persons cases, particularly in relation to the coroner/medical examiner system and human identification efforts.

This presentation aims to delve into this racial bias of missing and unidentified remains via an interdisciplinary perspective that combines expertise in criminology, forensic anthropology, and missing persons specifically. Through the combination of these disciplines, this study aims to further examine the ways in which race (particularly Black individuals compared to White individuals) shapes unidentified and missing persons investigations. The goals of this project include a better understanding of the role of racial bias in the ways in which missing persons cases are investigated, the resources allocated, and the likelihood of identification or recovery. This project is exploratory in nature; therefore, findings aim to serve as the building blocks in a better understanding of one of the many ways in which racial bias permeates the justice system. Previous research suggests that “missing White woman syndrome” is reflective in traditional news media and in the social media realm as well. Current research suggests that practices of law enforcement agencies reflect this racial bias as well. Suggestions for policies and future research are also explored, from both forensic anthropology and criminology perspectives.

Missing Persons, Racial Bias, Unidentified Remains