



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON FORENSIC SCIENCE



Survey of Law Enforcement Forensic Units

Type of Work Product: Directive Recommendation

Statement of Issue/Challenge

Many forensic services such as crime scene investigation, latent print examination, digital evidence analysis, and firearms analysis are conducted in law enforcement forensic units external to the traditional crime laboratory. Data does not exist to inform the development of policy and programs to support this population of forensic service providers. To ensure that policy is informed by robust data, it is recommended that the Attorney General direct the Bureau of Justice Statistics to develop and conduct a nationally representative survey of federal, state, and local law enforcement in the United States to determine:

- The number of forensic units
- The forensic services forensic units provide
- Accreditation status, including participation in a proficiency test program
- Certification status of examiners
- Case volumes
- Backlogs
- Staffing levels

Background

Since 2002, the Bureau of Justice Statistics has been conducting a census of publicly funded crime laboratories to provide a comprehensive look at the forensic services provided by federal, state, and local crime labs across the nation. The census collects data on staff, budgets and workloads, accreditation, proficiency tests and other quality measures. This data has been instrumental in guiding policy and programs to appropriately support forensic science practitioners, demonstrates trends, and informs strategies for the future.

Traditionally, we have focused our efforts on publicly funded crime laboratories, and in recent years, have begun to include all practitioners, including those that function outside of a traditional crime laboratory. Nomenclature is evolving to the point where we now refer to the population of forensic practitioners as ‘forensic science service providers.’ The definition has been expanded to include those who perform analysis of evidence associated with a criminal investigation, write reports, and offer opinion testimony in courts of law. While this seems intuitive, it is quite a challenging issue because while data *does* exist that defines the capabilities within traditional publicly funded crime laboratories, data does *not* exist that defines the forensic capabilities being performed in law enforcement forensic units. Forensic services provided outside a traditional crime laboratory typically include latent print, digital evidence, and firearms analysis in addition to crime scene processing.

Quality assurance is a critical issue that impacts all forensic science service providers – even those operating in environments that are not accredited. In order to appropriately develop policy and programs to support practitioners functioning outside of the traditional crime laboratory, we must have complete and accurate data.

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Recommended Implementation Strategy

The Attorney General should direct the Bureau of Justice Statistics to develop and conduct a nationally representative survey within the next two years to determine forensic capabilities within federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. The survey instrument should be developed in collaboration with the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the Major Cities Chiefs Association, the National Sheriff's Association, and the American Academy of Forensic Science, among other relevant stakeholder organizations.