



Criminalistics Section – 2004

B127 2002 Census of Publicly Funded Forensic Crime Laboratories

Joseph L. Peterson, DCrim, AB, Criminal Justice Department, University of Illinois at Chicago, 1007 West Harrison, Chicago, IL; and Susan H. Johns, MA, Illinois State Police Forensic Laboratory, Springfield, IL; Steven Smith, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Washington, DC*

The goal of this presentation is to inform the forensic science community of the status of the 2002 Census of Publicly Funded Forensic Laboratories that is being administered throughout the United States.

This paper will describe the work to date in support of the 2002 Census of Publicly Funded Forensic Laboratories in the U.S. In December 2001 the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) issued a notice in the Federal Register soliciting proposals to conduct a census of publicly funded crime laboratories. BJS announced it would be funding a survey to obtain "baseline information about the workload and operations of the approximately 400 forensic crime laboratories in the United States." The solicitation went on to state that it wished to identify "specific activities and resources" within laboratories that support their forensic analyses, including "personnel, budget, workload," and agencies for which scientific work is performed and results reported. In addition to supplying baseline statistical information on operations and workload of laboratories, BJS foresaw the survey assisting various governmental entities in assessing where added resources are needed and any technology disparities across jurisdictions. The University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), in concert with the University's Survey Research Laboratory and the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors, offered a proposal to engage in such research and was awarded a one-year grant in May 2002 to perform the census.

Forensic science laboratories are a mainstay in today's criminal justice system. In the past thirty-five years crime laboratories have evolved from an uncoordinated collection of fewer than 100 federal, state, and local laboratories scattered in various jurisdictions around the country, to today's array of more than 400 sophisticated scientific operations serving the nation's police and courts. Reliance on scientific evidence has grown dramatically, stimulated by rapid growth in laboratory technology applied to the examination of controlled substances, trace and pattern evidence, and biological fluids. It is in this latter area that revolutionary strides have taken place in DNA typing that have advanced the identification of human remains, promoted the solution of violent crimes, and contributed to the conviction of the guilty and exoneration of the innocent. DNA, fingerprint, and firearms computerized data bases today assist police investigators in developing suspects and in clearing otherwise unsolvable cases.

There have been several surveys of crime laboratories over the past 35 years, beginning with the John Jay survey in 1967 and culminating with the most recent BJS surveys of DNA Crime Laboratories for the years 1998 and 2001. The American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors (ASCLD) has also been a major player in plotting crime laboratory resources, with their most recent survey in 1998 that included descriptive/operational characteristics of laboratories and workload data, covering cases received, completed, backlogged, productivity of examiners, and court appearances. The workload section includes extensive discipline-specific reporting. The ASCLD surveys, however, are limited to its member laboratories.

The UIC research team has drafted a survey instrument and has had it reviewed by ASCLD advisors and cleared by the Office of Management and Budget. The major sections of the survey include organizational information, budget, staffing, workload, laboratory processes and procedures, equipment/supplies, private casework outsourcing, and quality control procedures. Names, addresses, and contact persons in laboratories have been verified and the survey pre-tested in four sites. Surveys are being mailed to all identified publicly funded crime laboratories in the U.S. with plans for extensive follow up (automated tracking system, telephone calls, emails, etc.) in order to achieve a 100% survey item response rate. UIC will provide BJS with a documented, formatted and archivable data set. Project team members will be available to discuss the current status of the survey and to answer any questions.

Census of Publicly Funded Forensic Crime Laboratories, UIC, ASCLD