



E48 “All the Things You Ask of Me”: Law Enforcement Experiences of Infant Death Investigation

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand law enforcement experiences and perspectives related to infant death investigation.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by contributing data to an aspect of death investigation for which scant previous research has been reported. This presentation will also reveal findings germane to efforts targeted at improving infant death investigation practice and outcomes.

The sudden and unexpected death of a seemingly healthy infant sets in motion a number of linked processes with potentially complex and far-reaching ramifications. While individuals, families, and communities grapple with the shock and heartbreak associated with the loss of a young life, a chain of multidisciplinary investigative responsibilities is initiated to address the question of causation. Currently, very little is known about how infant death investigations are conducted and, perhaps more importantly, how variability within structures and processes influence individual or aggregate case outcomes. Specifically, very little attention has been paid to the role of law enforcement within either the larger medicolegal death investigation structure or in the specific realm of infant death investigation. Though the medical examiner or coroner bears ultimate responsibility of certifying the cause and manner for a Sudden Unexpected Infant Death (SUID), medicolegal death investigations unfold as multidisciplinary endeavors dependent upon information obtained from a variety of sources; law enforcement officials invariably play a significant role in this process. In smaller and/or poorly funded jurisdictions, law enforcement may serve as the sole investigators of death; however, even when designated medicolegal death investigators participate on behalf of the coroner or medical examiner, law enforcement officials can still contribute significantly to a case. Patrol officers and deputies are often among the first to arrive at any death scene and, therefore, have the potential to significantly influence the trajectory of any investigation. Additionally, law enforcement investigators bear the burden of any resultant criminal investigation.

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of law enforcement officials charged with investigating SUIDs in nine Pacific Northwest jurisdictions. Data collected from open-ended, semi-structured interviews ($n=26$) revealed three dynamic and interrelated tensions experienced by law enforcement during the process of infant death investigation. Furthermore, their stories reveal that occupational norms and values, which may serve them well in many other circumstances, falter in the context of infant death investigations. Fortunately, participants' narratives also provided a foundation upon which to build recommendations intended to improve the efficacy of investigations, while simultaneously reducing tensions experienced by investigators and others involved in the challenging scenario of an SUID.

Infant Death, Law Enforcement, Investigation