



F39 The Impact of Forensic Evidence on Drug-Related Offense Sentencing Outcomes

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the intersection of forensic science and criminal justice case processing and the implications for policies.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by identifying trends in criminal justice case processing associated with drug-related offenses and identifying sources for backlogs by pinpointing specific reasons for untested forensic evidence and its influence on the cases of drug-related offenses.

This report will use Harris County District Clerk Court records and other available data to assess the relationship between untested forensic drug evidence and case dispositions. Recently, the Houston Forensic Science Center has taken steps to clear a backlog problem in its laboratory. The crime laboratory is not immune to recurring backlog problems or other struggles. The plan will span a period of ten months and would require \$2 million dollars to outsource DNA testing for approximately 1,000 cases. DNA sections within a crime laboratory are not the only divisions impacted with untested evidence. Toxicology and controlled substances sections can have long turnaround times, up to several months.

Regardless of the growth of forensic science services, published research related to the impact of forensic evidence and predictors of sentencing dispositions for drug-related offenses is lacking. The results of the first nationwide survey on untested forensic evidence was published in 2009. There are various reasons why evidence may not be tested, but there is a gap in the literature that discusses the impact on defendants and sentencing outcomes. Specifically, a question that is often not discussed is the relationship between untested evidence and the likelihood of someone accepting a plea deal. As a result of backlogs in crime laboratories, the criminal justice system can expect to see individuals make decisions that will have lasting consequences on their lives without the analysis of forensic evidence. Improper procedures and evidence tampering have troubled many crime laboratories across the nation, which has impacted past convictions and several thousand additional criminal court cases. Lengthy backlogs have lasting concerns in each step in the criminal justice system process. Prior literature indicates inconsistencies in the relationship between forensic evidence and sentencing. Given the limited research on backlogs and its consequences on the front end of the criminal justice system, there is urgency in needing prompt action for reforming both forensic science and criminal justice practices.

Crime laboratories must work closely with law enforcement and the court system to ensure fair due process of law. Therefore, this report contributes a guide to identify sources for backlogs in a local crime laboratory by pinpointing specific reasons for untested forensic evidence and its influence on the case processing of drug-related offenses.

Drug Evidence, Criminal Justice, Sentencing Outcomes