F14 The Fast and the Furious

Matthew J. Marvin, BS, Ron Smith and Associates, Inc, Collinsville, MS 39325; Sarah Chu, MS*, Innocence Project, New York, NY 10013*

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will be aware of the risks and costs of the limited examination procedures that are currently being implemented to address crime laboratory backlogs.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: Limited examination procedures carry risks and costs and have considerable criminal justice impacts. This presentation will impact the forensic science community by describing each type of procedure, articulate the costs and risks, and provide recommendations for moving forward.

The 2014 Census of Public Funded Forensic Crime Laboratories estimated that public forensic science service providers possessed a backlog of 570,100 requests. In 2014, 63 public forensic science service providers conducted latent print functions for a total of 67% of federal, 53% of state, 62% of county, and 88% of municipal jurisdictions. Backlogs of latent print requests grew from 6% in 2009 to 12% of latent print requests in 2014. Consequently, public forensic science service providers have been seeking ways to increase casework efficiency and reduce their backlogs. A myriad of different solutions to address latent print backlogs have been implemented across the United States. Limited examinations, eliminating verifications, set rules on exclusions, and incomplete searches for prints are just a few of the methods that have been proposed and implemented. While these procedures may be effective means to reduce backlogs, they may also produce a different set of risks and costs, and should not be considered as a best practice.

This presentation poses the question: What is the cost of these policies? This presentation will include case examples of missed evidence due to incomplete or rushed examinations, with an emphasis on the long-term impact of shortcuts in friction ridge examination. Consequences include the collateral consequences of pre-trial detention, not collecting or not analyzing relevant evidence in a case, reducing the latent print examiner's exposure to complex cases, or having no record of evidence that may turn out to be important in a case post-conviction. Although identifications and inclusions are typically the focus of latent print examinations, ensuring that exclusions are properly called is also critical to identifying the person who committed the crime and freeing the innocent.

This report submits that when evidence is not processed and analyzed in full, the forensic scientists cannot tell the whole story the evidence can tell. Additionally, quality assurance methods, such as increased documentation, are not a panacea when evidence has not been collected or analyzed. Ultimately, every one of these strategies carries risks and criminal justice costs and this presentation declares that the best practice is to collect, document, and analyze all prints at a crime scene. Finally, the question is posed: "What is the role of a forensic science laboratory in the criminal justice system?" as a guiding question for forensic science service providers as they contemplate whether they will engage in backlog reduction strategies. This presentation will conclude with recommended approaches or policies to address the potential risks of limited examination and other backlog reductions strategies if they must be applied.

Latent Print, Risk Management, Criminal Justice Outcomes