



Needs Assessment of Forensic Laboratories and Medical Examiner/Coroner Offices

Overview

The Department of Justice's (DOJ) Needs Assessment, published by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) in December 2019, examines the personnel, workload, infrastructure and equipment, and quality management needs of public crime laboratories and medical examiner and coroner (ME/C) offices. The assessment also includes an overview of academic forensic science programs, resources, and needs, and examines special topics such as the opioid crisis and emerging drug threats, digital and multimedia evidence, sexual assault casework, forensics for tribal communities, and mass disaster and critical incident preparedness and response.

A Comprehensive Assessment of the Forensic Community

This comprehensive Needs Assessment encompasses 200 pages and nearly 400 citations. The Executive Summary and each report section identify specific needs and challenges, as well as promising practices that provide solutions and strategies developed with insights from veteran experts.

NIJ conducted an extensive literature review and combined quantitative data from sources like the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Project FORESIGHT, and other federal program data. NIJ also conducted listening sessions with subject matter experts from various forensic disciplines and stakeholders from across the criminal justice system. Listening sessions representation included:

- American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors (ASCLD)
- International Association for Identification (IAI)
- International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)
- Major Cities Chiefs Association (MCCA)
- Association of State Criminal Investigative Agencies (ASCIA)
- National Sheriffs' Association (NSA)
- Society of Forensic Toxicologists (SOFT)
- American Board of Forensic Toxicology (ABFT)
- National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME)
- International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IACME)
- American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI)
- Scientific Working Group on Digital Evidence (SWGDE)
- Forensic Science Education Programs Accreditation Commission (FEPAC)

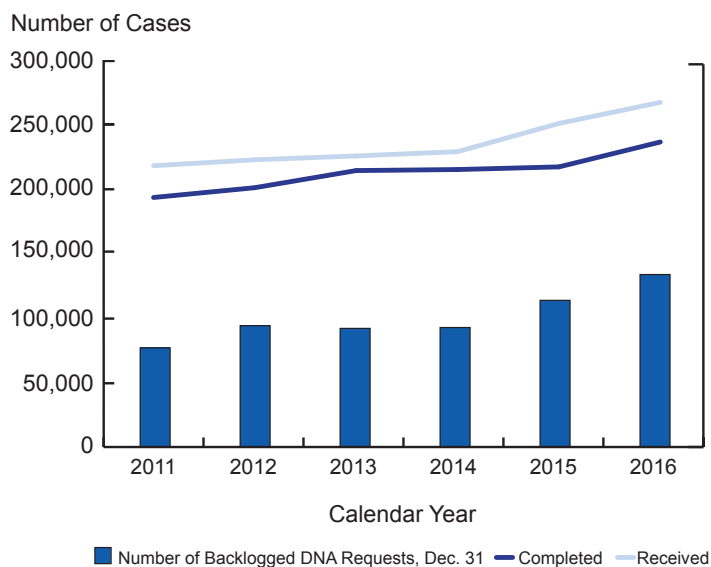


Download the full report, Needs Assessment of Forensic Laboratories and Medical Examiner/Coroner Offices, at ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/253626.pdf

Needs Identified

- Institutionalization of systems-based communications between forensic science service providers, their customers, and other stakeholders to better understand and calibrate expectations, track case status, and inform evidence submissions, testing priorities, and laboratory decision-making.
- Sufficient and consistent funding and strategic planning:
 - to process increasing amounts of forensic evidence driven by the supply and demand of forensic services, and meet the evolving needs of the justice system.
 - to address the impact of the opioid crisis and prepare labs and ME/Cs for other emerging drug threats.
 - to address ME/C workforce and workload challenges.
- Improvement in the personnel pipeline from education through hiring and training.
- Sufficient supply of graduates from academic programs who are prepared to seek and successfully obtain employment in forensic science.
- Sufficient and consistent funding for forensic practitioner training, continuing education, and professional development opportunities.
- Continued efforts to strengthen quality assurance measures and maintain a healthy and resilient workforce in the forensic sciences.

Trends in DNA Testing of Forensic Cases



Associated Challenges

- The physical capacity, infrastructure, and information technology for many forensic laboratories and ME/C offices are already maximized to their limits and/or outdated.
- With the exception of DNA analysis, there is a lack of dedicated funding for other forensic disciplines practiced by forensic laboratories and ME/C offices.
- Recruiting, hiring, and training are time and resource intensive, and background investigations dramatically reduce the pool of qualified applicants.
- Funding for training is typically only 0.5% of forensic laboratories' operating budgets.
- Increased workloads, combined with the increased complexities of forensic evidence and associated testing requirements, contribute to casework backlogs. Increased workloads can also threaten the accreditation status for those ME/C offices that are accredited.
- The ME/C system's inconsistent staffing and limited budgets, resources, and supplies impact the system's ability to effectively and efficiently perform death investigations across all ME/C system types and jurisdiction sizes.
- There is a lack of dedicated funding for forensic science research, development, and evaluations

Promising Practices

- Examples of systems-based approaches for informed decision-making for evidence submissions and analysis requests.
- Innovative mechanisms to better utilize current resources to increase efficiency, reduce workload, and improve turnaround times.
- Collaborative efforts to encourage cost sharing and promote systems-based approaches.
- Enhancing the forensic employment pipeline by increasing exposure to practical job experiences and expanding outreach, recruitment, and retention strategies.
- Availability of federal grant programs and resources to address the identified needs and challenges in the forensic sciences:
 - DOJ resources and funding opportunities to address laboratory efficiency and capacity challenges as well as multidisciplinary and systems-based approaches.
 - DOJ resources to invest in infrastructure development, facility renovations, new technologies, and equipment.
 - Training programs available through federal partnerships and continuing education opportunities through symposia, workshops, special events, and webinars.