

Firearm and Toolmark SOPs Assessed to Explore Variety in Forensics Laboratories

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Educational Objectives

The goal of the presentation is to show there may be a need for standardization of laboratory manuals in the firearm and toolmark discipline.

Impact Statement

This presentation will impact the forensic community by showing that much variability is prevalent between laboratories, which can in turn affect how evidence is analyzed and interpreted on a state to state basis.

Abstract

For this study we collected standard operating procedures (SOPs) from a small sample of labs from across the United States. We focused on requirements of firearm and toolmark examiners and how they differ from proposed OSAC standards that are currently under discussion. The 2009 NAS report *Strengthening Forensic Science in the United States: A Path Forward* called for improvement in quality assurance standards in forensic science over a decade ago, showing a need for effective SOPs in laboratories across the United States [1]. This combined with the fact that firearm and toolmark examination has been accepted in the courts since the 1920s suggests that practices by this time should be similar across labs [2,3]. A total of 15 laboratories were selected for the study and 5 areas were determined for focus in the SOPs. These areas included examination of bullets, firearms, cartridges, toolmarks, and tools. The reference we used for comparison were proposed standards by OSAC for firearm examination. The research also aims to include the opinions of examiners to ensure that all standards used are ones that examiners agree to be relevant.

Bullet examination appeared to have the best overall agreement because of the five core areas selected it contained the most SOP information at 92% of OSAC proposed guidelines being met. L4 had an SOP with all guidelines in the proposed OSAC standards met. L9 diverged in 19 proposed OSAC guidelines, while most labs averaged 9 differences overall. The 15 labs in total had 136 differences from the core requirements.

Data from the FORESIGHT project showed a wide range of financial allocation for labs from \$187 to \$1,604,830 [4]. This along with the fact that cases for some labs in the firearm discipline were as low as 12 a year, with less than one full time employee dedicated to firearm and toolmark work alone could be why some laboratory manuals lacked detail [4]. Standardization of lab manuals – at least for procedures that are deemed to be critically important — can help ensure that firearm and toolmark evidence is interpreted uniformly regardless of location, and can provide strong support for examiners while testifying in court [5]. The standards under discussion in the OSAC are likely to be revised and refined in months to come. Once a set of standard SOP recommendations is adopted, however, it will be possible to ensure common practice across the Nation.

Keywords: laboratory standard operating procedures, firearm and toolmark examination, forensic science

References

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