Treatment of Inconclusives in the AFTE Range of Conclusions

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Journal: Law, Probability and Risk  |  Publication Date: September 2020
Link: forensicstats.link/TreatmentOfInconclusives-DOI

OVERVIEW
Several studies have estimated the error rates of firearm examiners in recent years, most of which showed very small error rates overall. However, the actual calculation of these error rates, particularly how each study treats inconclusive results, differed significantly between studies. Researchers funded by CSAFE revisited these studies to see how inconclusive results were treated and how these differences impacted their overall error rate calculations.

GOALS
1. Survey various studies that assess the error rates of firearms examinations.
2. Determine the differences in how inconclusives are treated in each study.
3. Identify areas where these studies can be improved.

THE STUDY
Hofmann et al. surveyed the most cited black box studies involving firearm and toolmark analysis. These studies varied in structure, having closed-set or open-set data. They were also conducted in different regions, either in the United States and Canada or in the European Union. The most relevant difference, however, was how each study treated inconclusive results.

All studies used one of three methods to treat inconclusives:

- **Option 1**: Exclude the inconclusive from the error rate.
- **Option 2**: Include the inconclusive as a correct result.
- **Option 3**: Include the inconclusive as an incorrect result.

**Key Terms:**

- **Black Box Study**: a study that evaluates only the correctness of a participant’s decisions.
- **Closed-set Study**: one in which all known and questioned samples come from the same source.
- **Open-set Study**: one in which the questioned samples may come from outside sources.
Hofmann et al. propose a fourth option:

- Include the inconclusive as an elimination.
- Calculate the error rates for the examiner and the process separately.

While most studies included a bias toward the prosecution, this was not the case for studies conducted in the European Union. Further study is recommended to verify this difference and determine its cause.

For more information, read the full study at forensicstats.link/TreatmentOfInconclusives

Explore relevant publications:
- forensicstats.link/Firearm-Error-Rates-Webinar
- forensicstats.link/BulletStriationExperiment

CSAFE is a publicly funded organization headquartered at Iowa State University. The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) is one of the center’s providers, supporting CSAFE as a nationally recognized Center of Excellence in Forensic Sciences, NIST Award #70NANB15H176 and #70NANB20H019.