

The myth of CSI

In reality, many forensic science labs are corrupt or incompetent

Boston Globe - Boston, Mass.

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Date: Oct 13, 2010

Start Page: A.15

Section: Opinion

Text Word Count: 673

Document Text

THE CONTROVERSY about whether the state's chief medical examiner falsified his credentials puts one more crack in our national myth about crime scene investigations. That myth, created by the CSI shows that have been a staple of TV for the past decade, portray crime labs as models of ultra-modern efficiency, where dedicated investigators use state-of-the-art (or even fictional) science to solve impossible cases in the course of an hour.

Over the past several years we've learned that the image is quite far from reality. The quality of American crime scene forensics is wildly inconsistent: many labs have poorly trained investigators, antiquated equipment, and cases backed up for weeks. In some labs, investigators have purposely altered test results in order to get findings that favor the prosecution. Here are a few recent examples:

An ongoing investigation in North Carolina has revealed that agents at the State Bureau of Investigation lab have corrupted their science to suit the prosecution. They misinterpreted blood stain patterns, re-ran experiments until they got "right" results, neglected to conduct important laboratory tests, and conducted phony blood analyses. The result: More than 100 wrongful convictions. Three people may have been wrongfully executed.

In San Francisco, a criminalist in the city's crime lab has been skimming cocaine from the evidence room for years. Her evidence-tampering revealed such lax accounting and security measures that the state has invalidated many convictions and has slammed the drug prosecution process to a halt. A local public defender described it as a "tsunami of incompetence" - so severe that the lab had to be closed and drug cases handled by another facility. At least 750 drug-related cases have been dismissed.

Houston's crime lab has been wracked by one scandal after another. In 2003 the police department's DNA lab was found to be so error-prone that the city shut it down. It reopened, only to be closed again several years later. This year a team of outside consultants found technical errors in 62 percent of the department's fingerprint cases.

Detroit closed its crime lab in 2008 after reviewers found a "shocking level of incompetence." All Detroit's CSI work now goes to the state crime lab, which further strains the state's already-burdened resources.

No one knows when these problems began, or if they have quietly been with us since the establishment of the first American crime labs in the 1920s. The problems became visible in the 1990s, when DNA technology made it possible to re-examine blood, sperm, and other evidence that had been preserved from crime scenes.

Since then, attorneys from the Innocence Project and other organizations have overturned hundreds of wrongful convictions. Last year, in the first statistical study of overturned convictions, legal scholars found that nearly 70 percent were based on mistakes in the crime lab or invalid testimony by forensic experts.

Meanwhile, the National Academy of Sciences has reported widespread inadequacies in America's crime labs, including

outdated equipment, a lack of standardized procedures, and "staggering" case backlogs. They also faulted the culture of certain crime labs, in which technicians seemed more motivated to provide evidence that would support the prosecution rather than produce a scientific finding.

To address these problems, the academy recommends re-inventing the nation's forensic labs - not as arms of the police force but as independent scientific entities, with ties to universities and the research community. Traditional forensic methods, such as fingerprinting and hair analysis, would need to be reevaluated for scientific accuracy, and technicians would need to meet national educational standards.

It will be a long, hard slog to getting this crucial part of our justice system into shape. Meanwhile, next time you watch Horatio Caine and his CSI team solve an impossible case with futuristic efficiency, remember - like much of what you see about justice on television, it's more a morality tale than a portrait of reality.

Douglas Starr is a professor of science journalism at Boston University and author of "The Killer of Little Shepherds: A True Crime Story and the Birth of Forensic Science."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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