

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2013, about 285,000 individuals age 12 or older were reported victims of sexual assault, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Studies have shown that exams performed by sexual assault forensic examiners—medical providers trained in collecting and preserving forensic evidence—may result in better physical and mental health care for victims, better evidence collection, and higher prosecution rates. Yet, concerns have been raised about the availability of examiners. The Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 authorized funding for DOJ grant programs that can be used by states and other eligible entities, such as nonprofit organizations, to train and fund examiners.

GAO was asked to review the availability of examiners nationwide. In this report, GAO describes (1) the prevalence and use of federal grants to train or fund sexual assault forensic examiners, (2) what is known about the availability of such examiners nationwide and in selected states, and (3) the challenges selected states face in maintaining a supply of examiners. GAO analyzed 2013 DOJ data on grantees' use of funding to train or fund examiners—the most recent full year of data available—and reviewed literature, relevant laws and DOJ documentation. GAO also interviewed grantees in six states selected based on several factors including population and geographic location, as well as DOJ officials, Department of Health and Human Services officials, and experts, such as health care association officials.

View [GAO-16-334](#). For more information, contact Katherine M. Iritani at (202) 512-7114 or iritani@gao.gov.

SEXUAL ASSAULT

Information on Training, Funding, and the Availability of Forensic Examiners

What GAO Found

Federal funding from three key Department of Justice (DOJ) grant programs can be used to train or fund sexual assault forensic examiners and for a range of other activities related to sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. In 2013, at least one grantee in 49 states used such funds to provide training to examiners and at least one grantee in 26 states funded examiner positions. In 49 states, approximately 227 grantees or subgrantees—referred to collectively as grantees—reported providing training for over 6,000 examiners in 2013. The type of training examiners received ranged from comprehensive examiner training to training on specific topics, such as courtroom testimony. The extent of examiner training efforts supported with funds from the three DOJ grant programs varied by state. For example, in about half of the states, fewer than 100 examiners received training. In addition, in the states where at least one grantee funded examiner staff positions in 2013, grantees funded less than one position, on average. Approximately 75 grantees in 26 states funded roughly 50 full-time equivalent examiner positions in 2013.

On the basis of literature GAO reviewed as well as interviews with experts and state officials, data on the number of examiners nationwide and in selected states are limited or unavailable. However, officials in all six selected states told GAO that the number of examiners available in their state did not meet the need for exams, especially in rural areas. For example, officials in Wisconsin explained that nearly half of all counties in the state do not have any examiners available. In health care facilities where examiners are available, they are typically available in hospitals on an on-call basis, though the number available varies by facility and may not provide enough capacity to offer examiner coverage 24 hours, 7 days a week.

There are multiple challenges to maintaining a supply of examiners, according to interviews with officials in six selected states. These include:

- **Limited availability of training.** Officials in five of six selected states reported that the availability of classroom, clinical, and continuing education training opportunities is a challenge to maintaining a supply of trained examiners.
- **Weak stakeholder support for examiners.** Officials in five of six selected states reported that obtaining support from stakeholders, such as hospitals, was a challenge. For example, hospitals may be reluctant to cover the costs of training examiners or paying for examiners to be on-call.
- **Low examiner retention rates.** The above-mentioned and other challenges, including the emotional and physical demands on examiners, contribute to low examiner retention rates. Officials in one state estimated that while the state trained 540 examiners over a two-year period, only 42 of those examiners were still practicing in the state at the end of those 2 years.

Officials described strategies that can help address these challenges, such as implementing web-based training courses, clinical practice labs, mentorship programs, and multidisciplinary teams that respond to cases of sexual assault.

DOJ provided technical comments on a draft of this report, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.