

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-516](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The FBI Laboratory, within the Department of Justice (DOJ), is responsible for analysis of forensic evidence for the FBI, other parts of DOJ, and domestic law enforcement agencies, among others.

GAO was asked to examine how the FBI Laboratory ensures the reliability of its forensic examinations, in particular within its Chemistry and Trace Evidence Units. For these two units, this report addresses (1) how the FBI Laboratory works to ensure quality in conducting forensic examinations, and (2) the extent to which it has taken steps to ensure adherence to the FBI Laboratory's quality standards.

GAO reviewed policies and procedures of the FBI Laboratory and its Chemistry and Trace Evidence Units; audit and accreditation reports from 2008, when the Laboratory was accredited to international standards, through 2015, the most recent available; the training records of all 47 staff who conducted casework in these two units from fiscal year 2011 to July 2016, the most recent available; and evaluation records for examiner testimonies and related laboratory reports in these two units from fiscal years 2011 to 2015, the 5 fiscal years prior to this review. GAO also independently sought to obtain testimony transcripts the FBI was unable to obtain for this period.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the FBI Laboratory's transcript acquisition procedure routinely capture and use additional information critical to transcript acquisition. The FBI concurred with our recommendation and described planned actions for implementation.

View [GAO-17-516](#). For more information, contact Diana Maurer at (202) 512-8777 or maurerd@gao.gov.

JUNE 2017

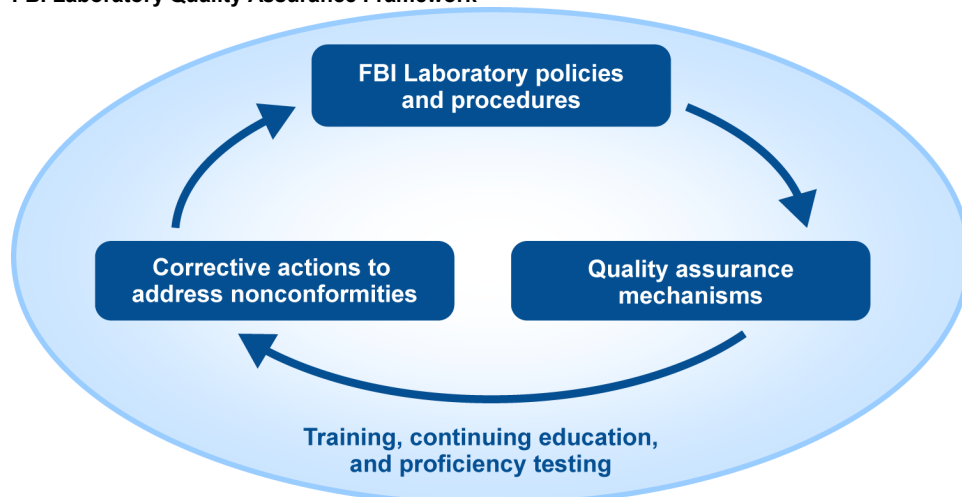
FBI LABORATORY

Chemistry and Trace Evidence Units Generally Adhere to Quality Standards, but Could Review More Examiner Testimonies

What GAO Found

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Laboratory has a framework in place to help ensure quality in its forensic examinations of chemical and trace evidence. Based on accreditation results and GAO's review, the framework meets international and accreditation standards. The FBI Laboratory quality assurance framework consists of policies and procedures, quality assurance mechanisms, corrective actions, and training requirements that are designed to ensure quality in its forensic examinations and related activities (see figure). The framework includes policies, procedures, and training specific to each unit of the Laboratory, such as the Chemistry and Trace Evidence Units.

FBI Laboratory Quality Assurance Framework



Source: GAO analysis of FBI Laboratory information. | GAO-17-516

GAO found that the FBI Laboratory generally ensures the Chemistry and Trace Evidence Units adhere to quality standards for conducting forensic examinations, including conducting audits, implementing corrective actions, ensuring staff have appropriate training, and reviewing laboratory reports. However, the Laboratory's program to review examiner testimonies to ensure they are accurate and within the scientific limits of the given forensic discipline is limited by difficulties in acquiring testimony transcripts. Specifically, the Laboratory did not acquire transcripts and conduct internal evaluations for nearly half of the testimonies (78 of 164) given by Chemistry and Trace Evidence Unit examiners from 2011 through 2015, citing difficulties in locating transcripts and lack of response from courts. To better understand these factors, GAO sought and obtained almost half of the 78 transcripts (36 of 78). While attempting to obtain the remainder, GAO confirmed some of the difficulties identified by the FBI. Consistent with internal control standards, the FBI Laboratory could better ensure it obtains more transcripts for review by routinely capturing and using additional information that is critical to transcript acquisition, such as court jurisdiction and points of contact. Obtaining additional transcripts could help the FBI Laboratory expand its monitoring of examiner testimonies to help ensure the testimonies are accurate and within scientific limits, as defined by FBI and accreditation standards.