

Digital forensic examiners face stress, role-conflict

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Despite playing an increasingly vital role in criminal investigations, digital forensic examiners face staffing cuts, heavy caseloads and stress within police departments that may not fully understand their responsibilities, according to a study led by a Michigan State University criminologist.

Police officials should consider hiring more digital forensic examiners or, failing that, improving their [work environment](#), said Thomas Holt, MSU assistant professor of criminal justice. His study appears in the May issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*.

Digital forensic examiners gather evidence from digital media such as computers, cell phones and other devices for use in the prosecution of crimes.

"There needs to be some consideration given to how we improve the [work experience](#) for forensic digital examiners given that they're going to be tasked more and more over time," Holt said.

As states and local agencies struggle with decreased revenue, forensic labs in Detroit and elsewhere around the country have been closed, leaving many existing labs understaffed. A recent report by the National Academy of Sciences said there is a backlog of [forensic evidence](#) as well as major questions about the capacity to reasonably train and staff labs to handle the load.

The job of a digital forensic examiner can be grim, particularly when it entails searching through computers for [child pornography](#) images, Holt said.

In addition, because the field of digital forensics is relatively new, the examiners' colleagues and bosses may not understand – or even support – their role, he said.

The study found that, overall, digital [forensic](#) examiners experience a moderate amount of stress but also a high level of job satisfaction.

"It turns out, their levels of stress are directly tied to role conflict where they have different demands on their time and unclear standards for completing a task," Holt said. "Generally, there's no agreed upon process to collect evidence or seize images; there are multiple ways to get to an end point. And this can produce a pretty significant amount of stress – imagine trying to explain to your co-workers or your boss that this is my job and this is how I do it, but they don't necessarily understand."

Provided by Michigan State University

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