

## New efforts aim to shore up forensic science—but will they work?

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Five years ago, a report on the state of forensic science by the National Academy of Sciences decried the lack of sound science in the analysis of evidence in criminal cases across the country. It spurred a flurry of outrage and promises, but no immediate action. Now, renewed efforts are underway, according to an article in *Chemical & Engineering News*, the weekly news magazine of the American Chemical Society.

C&EN editors Andrea Widener and Carmen Drahl note that the 2009 [report](#) served as a critical wake-up call to the public, defense attorneys and policymakers. Even the most common and long-standing forensic techniques such as fingerprinting were deemed questionable. But as scandals in forensic labs within the past five years make clear, most efforts to institute major change fizzled out—until last year. The Department of Justice (DOJ) and the National Institute of Standards & Technology (NIST) teamed up to create a National Commission on Forensic Science. The new entity is tasked with going back to the 2009 report and figuring out how to turn its recommendations into action. Additionally, NIST is starting an organization to create uniform standards across the field.

But, the article notes, some observers have their doubts about whether this round of efforts will yield any concrete changes.

Among the challenges is a lack of money. The DOJ and NIST are tackling the problem out of their existing budgets, and Congress doesn't seem inclined to support the issue with new funding. And although the

new commission can make recommendations, it's up to the U.S. attorney general as to whether to make federal labs follow them.

But the attorney general can't force state labs to do the same. On the other hand, working in favor of change is openness. The commission's recommendations will be public and available for use by defense attorneys, accreditors and legislators, which could be enough to force standards higher.

**More information:** "Forcing Change in Forensic Science"  
[cen.acs.org/articles/92/i19/Forcing-Change-in-Forensic-Science.html](https://cen.acs.org/articles/92/i19/Forcing-Change-in-Forensic-Science.html)

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