

# The Science and Practice of Veterinary Forensics

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TIPS Animal Law Committee  
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# A field with promise

But some barriers to practical application exist

Veterinary forensics is an emerging field of practice at the intersection of veterinary medicine and criminal justice. Veterinarians can add significant expertise to the interpretation of animal conditions, including capturing evidence and providing expert opinion during criminal cases on whether an animal's injuries are consistent with maltreatment or non-accidental injury.

***Veterinarians may find evidence that will refute an unlikely story of how an animal was harmed.***

## COMPARATIVE DEATH INVESTIGATIONS

If we look at the pathway for the investigation of a questioned death of a person: the situation is reported, a response is generated, the crime scene is frozen, experienced investigators document the scene, interview witnesses, the medical examiner's office responds, the body is packaged, transported, examined, photographed, radiographed, injuries diagrammed, trace evidence and tissues collected and a report is generated. This report includes a determination of suicide, homicide, natural, accidental or undetermined. This work is all performed at the expense of the government and in accordance with written protocols.

In the case of an animal death, there is no one prescribed pathway to follow. Dead animals found on public or private property may be discarded without any examination. If a concerned citizen attempts to report concerns, there is no one reporting number to call. Once the call is received, it may be dispatched to animal control, police or public works; or the caller may be referred to a private agency. The knowledge of applicable law, experience level, commitment and engagement by those departments or agencies is highly variable.

As of yet, no protocols have been promulgated by the Organization of Scientific Area Committees of the National Institutes of Science and Technology for crime scene response that include crimes against animals & there is no section which addresses forensic sciences' application to animal crimes other than poaching & wildlife smuggling. The Crime Scene Investigation sub-committee has begun exploration of standards for responding to crime scenes involving animals.

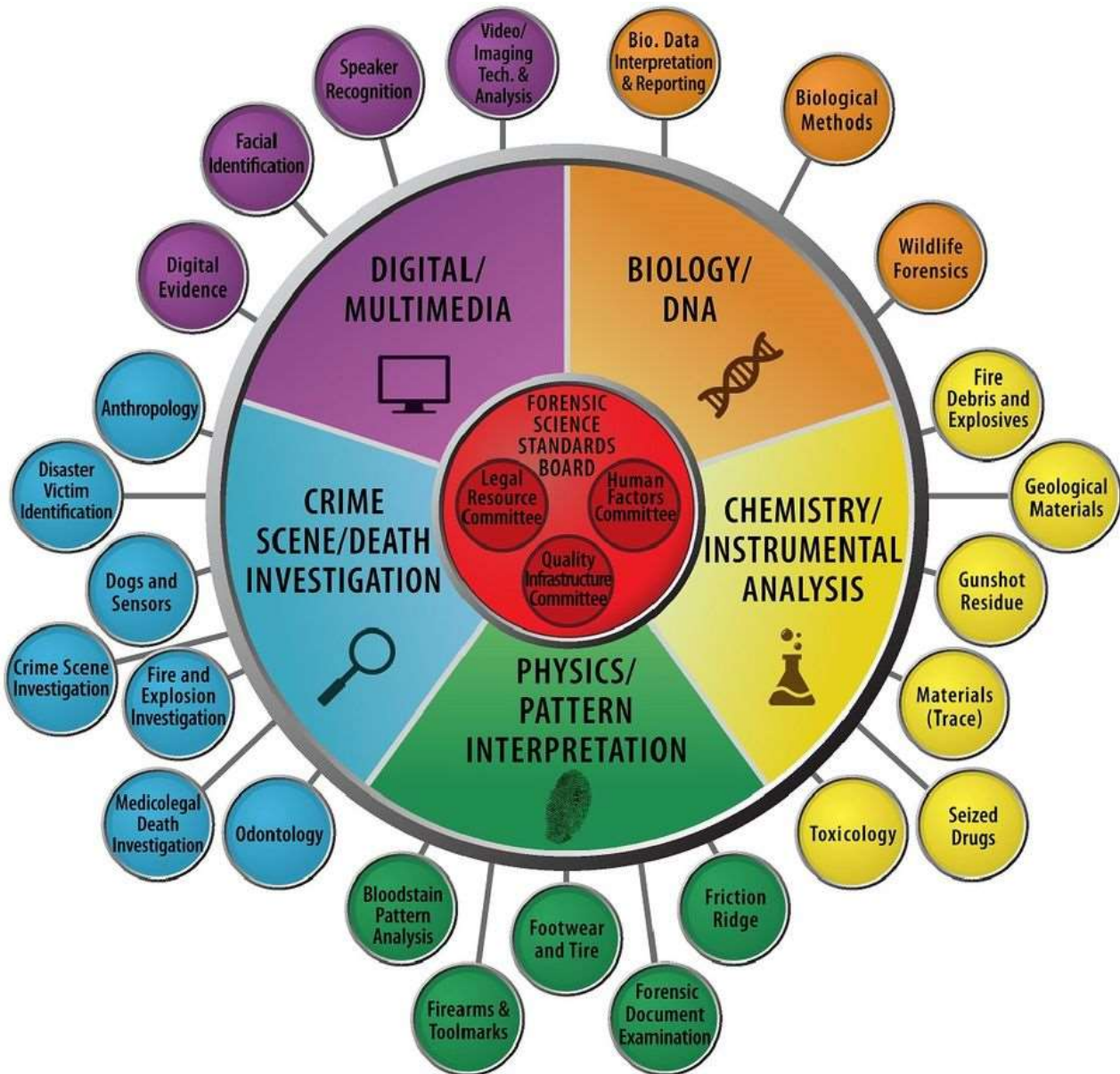


Figure 1: The Organization of Scientific Area Committees works to strengthen the nation's use of forensic science by facilitating the development of technically sound forensic science standards and by promoting the adoption of those standards by the forensic science community.

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## INJURY INVESTIGATIONS

An injured animal may be taken to a private veterinarian, or a veterinarian at a municipal or private animal welfare agency. Depending on available financial resources and the knowledge of the veterinarian relating to animal maltreatment, case work-up and documentation can vary widely. Some veterinary schools include basics of veterinary forensics training in elective courses, but most veterinarians lack specific training in the appropriate documentation and reporting of animal cruelty cases.

If an investigation is launched, it may be carried out by animal control, local police or the sheriff's office, or by a private non-profit animal welfare agency with police powers. These investigations may be well coordinated with other agencies and the information collected will be reported in the Department of Justice's National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS). This is far from a universal practice as of yet.

## ABOUT NIBRS

In September 2014, the FBI announced that a separate category of animal cruelty would be added to Group A of the NIBRS, joining other major crimes in Group A such as arson, assault, and homicide, in which both incidents and arrests should be reported.

Before this change, animal cruelty crimes were captured with more minor crimes under the catchall category "All Other Offenses," making them unavailable for later analysis. With this change, animal cruelty crime data will have detailed information and allow for more granularity of analysis (see <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/ucr>).

A challenge to the reporting of animal cruelty incidents include the fact that the incident must be recorded into an updated software system of an agency with Originating Agency Identification (ORI) number. If an incident is responded to by animal control that does not report within the public safety department, or a private non-profit animal welfare agency, that data will not be captured.

The benefit of a complete dataset related to animal cruelty includes an understanding of relationships to other crimes, and a guide for directing resources to better protect animals and people.

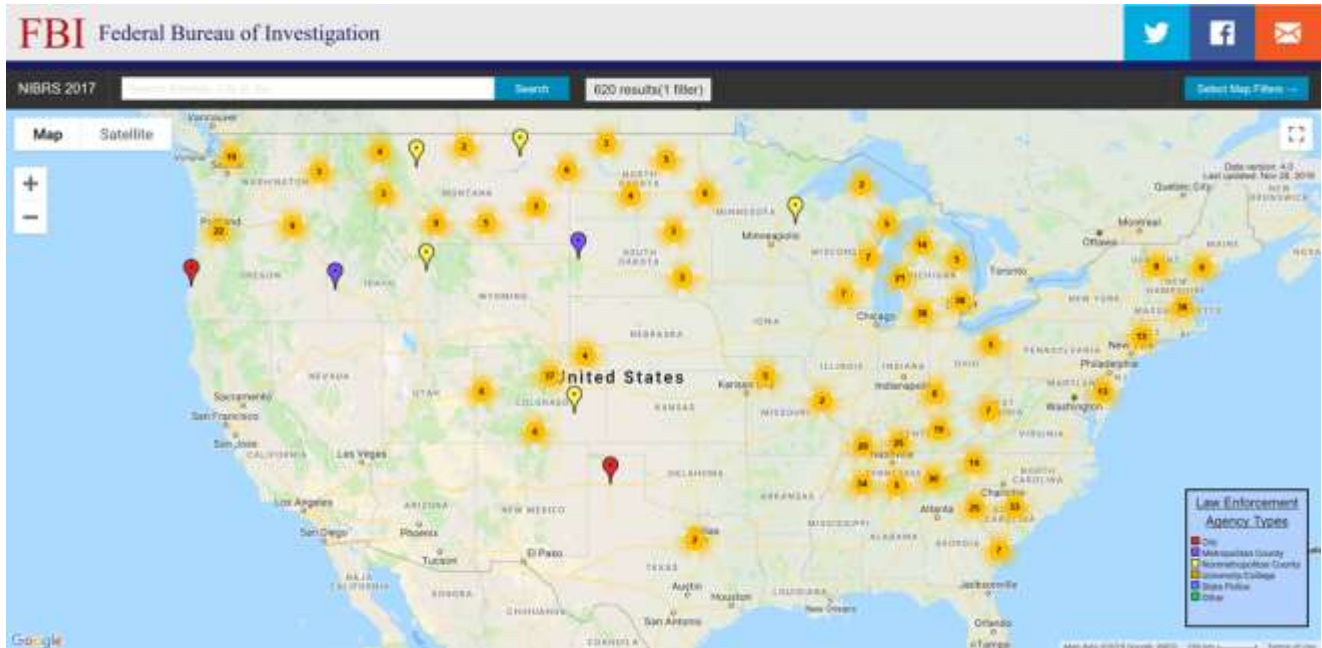


Figure 2: NIBRS reported just 620 incidents of animal cruelty nationally in the US in 2017 from <https://nibrs.fbi.gov/2017/>

## EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

The International Veterinary Forensic Sciences Association hosts an annual conference that is attended by approximately 100 veterinarians and allied professionals each year. The University of Florida has an online certificate and masters program in veterinary forensics which is open to professionals including but not limited to “practicing veterinarians and veterinary technicians, criminal justice professionals, individuals involved in shelter medicine operations, animal control officers, law enforcement officials and forensic investigators.”

## THE FUTURE

Further recognition of animal cruelty as an important crime in its own standing, as well as in relationship to other crimes will lead to more support for appropriate investigations and responses.

More veterinary schools are incorporating veterinary forensics into curriculum and perhaps it is not too much to hope for forensic veterinarians having strong relationships with every police department someday to aid in the vigorous investigation of alleged or suspected animal cruelty crimes.