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Forensic Science in England & Wales, a Commentary

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Is forensic science in England and Wales in crisis? It would be easy to point to Key Forensic Services entering administration in January 2018, the closure of Forensic Telecommunication Services in 2017 that of Contact Traces in 2015 and more fundamentally, the closure of the Forensic Science Service in 2012 and conclude that it is. I could point to the alleged data manipulation at Radox Testing Services, uncovered in 2017, or to the recently reported problems with 33 cases in the Metropolitan Police Service. I could look simply at the rising number of referrals to me as Regulator year on year. But to do so without deeper consideration would be to follow the tabloid-style crisis narrative that has dogged forensic science in the past few years. Instead, it is worth examining the situation in more detail.

Structural Issues

In England and Wales, forensic science is primarily commissioned by police, often during the investigation of incidents. Only a small proportion of forensic science becomes disputed evidence, tested during an adversarial trial process. Some of the commissioning of forensic science is internal: police forces conduct the vast majority of crime scene investigation, fingerprint enhancement and comparison and digital forensics, although some forces, notably the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), conduct a much wider range of forensic science activities. The commercial sector provides much of the analytical laboratory work and expert interpretation, with specialist services such as explosives examination and chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) examinations being carried out in public sector laboratories which are part of the Ministry of Defence.

“Police” is not a single entity. There are 43 geographically based police forces in England & Wales, along with several national forces such as British Transport

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