



General Information About Careers in Forensic Science

The Northeastern Illinois Regional Crime Laboratory receives many requests for information from young people interested in careers in forensic science. Unfortunately, due to safety and security concerns, we are not able to offer tours of our facility nor are we regularly able to provide internships, but we would still like to help where we can.

As far as degrees are concerned, Bachelor of Science degrees in chemistry or biology are the ones I recommend most strongly as they provide a good scientific foundation and the most flexibility should your career plans change. If your heart is set on a forensic science degree, make sure to look to FEPAC accredited universities only (fepac-edu.org) and focus on science courses. Bachelor's degrees in Forensic Science do not confer any advantage in hiring over the basic science degrees. Advanced degrees (M.S. and Ph.D.) can provide a competitive advantage in getting your foot in the door, but there are costs to be weighed when deciding whether to pursue those degrees. You do need to be prepared to speak in front of groups of people and defend your work in the court system. Crime labs can provide some training in this regard. However, learning these skills earlier will be a benefit to you, especially during the interview process.

Though there is some momentum in the forensic community to adopt certification for all forensic scientists, certification is something achieved after you've been conducting independent casework in a laboratory; usually for a year. Not all labs require certification, but that may change in the future. If you're smart enough to get through college and land a job in a crime lab, you'll be able to do the work and pass the tests to achieve certification.

You should know that your personal character and integrity matter GREATLY. Most forensic labs can't hire people with criminal records or drug use in their past. Use your goal of working in a forensic lab to help you avoid behaviors that might keep you from that goal. Be a leader in this respect and help others avoid behaviors that may limit their futures.

Though some forensic laboratories have personnel who go to crime scenes, the vast majority of positions, like those at the Northeastern Illinois Regional Crime Laboratory, are strictly in the lab. Unlike television shows, real forensic scientists are highly specialized and work in just one discipline (or at most two). Bench-level forensic scientists spend about 50% of their time processing evidence in the lab and about 50% of their time at their desks analyzing data, writing and reviewing reports, as well as discussing and defending interpretations with other scientists. These are rough estimates and vary depending on the discipline. To a lesser extent, they spend time writing and reviewing policies and procedures, providing training for law enforcement agencies and attorney's offices, participating in section-specific or lab-wide meetings and testifying in court. Most scientists travel to, and sometimes present research, at a forensic conference once every year or two.

The forensic science community is very collegial and still relatively small. It is easy to make many contacts with scientists across the country which is helpful to your development as a forensic scientist.

Working in a crime lab is a very satisfying job as you get to put your science education to work and help protect your community. How great is that? There are many opportunities for continuing education and training that allow you to expand your horizons within this career. You're not likely to get rich by working in a forensics laboratory, but you will earn a good living and really, becoming wealthy was not likely the reason you were interested in this profession the first place. If you are like most forensic scientists, you were drawn to this field because of the unique opportunity to apply your interest and education in science towards public service and public safety.

Best wishes for a bright future!



Philip T. Kinsey, Ph.D.
Executive Director