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Report Condemns Police Lab Oversight

By [JEREMY W. PETERS](#)

The New York State Police's supervision of a major crime laboratory was so poor that it overlooked evidence of pervasively shoddy [forensics](#) work, allowing an analyst to go undetected for 15 years as he falsified test results and compromised nearly one-third of his cases, an investigation by the state's inspector general has found.

The analyst's training was so substandard that at one point last year, investigators discovered he could not properly operate a microscope essential to performing his job, the [report](#) released on Thursday said.

And when the State Police became aware of the analyst's misconduct, an internal review by superiors in the Albany lab deliberately omitted information implicating other analysts and suggesting systemic problems with the way evidence was handled, the report said. Instead, the review focused blame mostly on the analyst, Garry Veeder, who committed suicide in May 2008 during the internal inquiry.

"Cutting corners in a crime lab is serious and intolerable," said the state's inspector general, [Joseph Fisch](#). "Forensic laboratories must adhere to the highest standards of competence, independence and integrity. Anything less undermines public confidence in our criminal justice system."

Several lab workers whose actions were criticized in the report remain in their jobs pending an internal review of the inspector general's findings, the State Police said.

The State Police superintendent, Harry J. Corbitt, said that the agency planned to hire an outside consultant. "Appropriate remedial measures will be taken with respect to any conduct falling below the highest standards," said Mr. Corbitt, whose nomination last year by Gov. [David A. Paterson](#) was meant to help rehabilitate the scandal-tainted agency.

After the State Police began its internal investigation last year, it notified district attorneys across the state that evidence in criminal cases examined by Mr. Veeder might have been compromised. Mr. Veeder worked in the crime lab analyzing so-called trace evidence, like fibers, hair, impressions and other physical material found at scenes of crimes, including homicides.

But on Thursday, police officials said that none of the district attorneys had found that Mr. Veeder's work had cast doubt on any of their convictions.

"We are satisfied that there were no [wrongful convictions](#), nor any miscarriages of justice which resulted from these improper procedures," Mr. Corbitt said, stating a viewpoint also shared by Mr. Fisch.

Still, forensic science experts and advocates for those wrongfully convicted said the case pointed to longstanding problems in police behavior and underlined the need to hold law enforcement agencies accountable.

“It is a wake-up call to the forensic community,” said [Barry Scheck](#), director of [the Innocence Project](#) and a member of the New York State Commission on Forensic Science, which monitors all the state’s crime labs. “What’s alarming about this report and others that we’ve seen like it is it’s not so much the bad actors, it’s the fact that the system didn’t detect them earlier.”

There have been several high-profile cases in recent years in which police labs mishandled crime scene evidence, casting doubt on convictions. A convicted rapist was released in 2003 after an examination of the Houston Police Department’s lab found widespread deficiencies. Detroit shut down its police crime lab last year after an outside audit found errors in 10 percent of cases surveyed.

In Mr. Veeder’s case, supervisors discovered during an internal inquiry that he had routinely skipped a preliminary fiber analysis and then created data “to give the appearance of having conducted an analysis not actually performed,” the inspector general’s report stated.

The State Police have disputed the effectiveness of the preliminary test and said there was no evidence that Mr. Veeder’s work resulted in a piece of trace evidence’s being misidentified.

The report said Mr. Veeder used a “crib sheet” provided to him by a former supervisor to falsify the test results. At one point, Mr. Veeder told investigators, “They told me from the past, you go to this and plug it in,” the report said. “This is how I was trained to, how we’ve always done it.”

But Mr. Veeder’s allegations involving other lab workers were never part of the final report to the State Police’s internal affairs division. State Police investigators and the lab’s management “minimized and precipitously discarded the seriousness and extent of problems” at the lab, the inspector general’s report said.

It said that one State Police investigator, Keith Coonrod, mischaracterized Mr. Veeder’s responses implicating other lab scientists and skewed Mr. Veeder’s statements to give the impression that it was his incompetence — not widespread misconduct — that led to the problems.

Mr. Coonrod has been temporarily reassigned to a State Police job outside of the lab pending the outcome of the internal review.

Despite Mr. Coonrod’s omissions, the inspector general also faulted Mr. Coonrod’s superiors. “There exists no doubt that laboratory management possessed sufficient information that Veeder’s individual misconduct implicated potentially broader systemic issues, but failed to take appropriate action,” the report said.

The report named a number of lab supervisors at the time — including the director, Gerald Zeosky, and assistant director Richard Nuzzo — and describes them as unfazed by the inquiry and dismissive of Mr. Veeder’s broader claims. Mr. Zeosky remains in charge of the lab. Mr. Nuzzo was promoted and given a new job in the internal affairs division, but police officials said he would have had no involvement in the investigation of the lab.

Another section of the report stated that Mr. Nuzzo was also found to have intimidated a lab technician who was working on a case unrelated to Mr. Veeder.

Problems with Mr. Veeder's work were first detected in 2008 during an accreditation review by the [American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors/Laboratory Accreditation Board](#). The State Police then did an internal investigation and alerted the inspector general's office, which began its own review.

On May 23, 2008, Mr. Veeder hanged himself in the garage of his home outside Albany.

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