



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON  
**SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY**

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Opening Statement

**Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)**

Full Committee Hearing:

*Raising the Bar: Progress and Future Needs in Forensic Science*

Tuesday, September 10, 2019

Good morning and welcome to today's hearing.

The criminal justice system relies on forensic science to identify and prosecute criminals and exonerate the falsely accused. Unfortunately, for too long, the science in forensic science was a misnomer. According to data from the Innocence Project, 367 individuals convicted of violent crimes across 37 states have been exonerated as a result of DNA evidence.

Nearly half of these false convictions involved the misapplication of forensic science, most often because of a lack of science, standards, and training, but in some cases involving misconduct. I am deeply troubled by the likelihood that these numbers represent just the tip of the iceberg.

As revealed over many years of investigative reporting by the *Washington Post*, for decades there were people in this system who knew there were significant problems and stayed silent, or perhaps tried to speak up but were silenced by those above them. A 2009 report from the National Academies, *Strengthening Forensic Science in the United States: A Path Forward*, finally broke the silence and brought this issue into the public discourse. The central conclusion of the report was that the interpretation of forensic evidence, across many disciplines, was severely compromised by the lack of supporting science and standards.

The National Academies recommended a number of steps to improve the accuracy, reliability, and validity of forensic evidence. With a focus on the role of Federal science agencies, especially the National Institute of Standards and Technology, in 2012, I joined colleagues in the Senate to introduce the *Forensic Science and Standards Act*. I continued to reintroduce that bill but it never received a hearing, until today.

As forensic science plays an increasing role in our criminal justice system, we are here today to explore how the Science Committee can help improve forensic science practices in the nation. We'll learn about improvements since the NAS report, with an eye to the improvements that still need to be made. We will hear from the witnesses their recommendations for how to strengthen the existing legislation. This is an excellent panel representing diverse perspectives and we have a lot to learn from you.

We have all heard heartbreaking stories of men and women who have spent years, sometimes decades in prison for a crime they did not commit. These wrongful convictions take a profound human toll on innocent men and women and their families and mar the reputation of our justice system. And that's not all. One study of 108 DNA exoneration cases found that 121 of the actual perpetrators went on to commit an additional 337 crimes, including rape and murder.

However, I am encouraged by all of the new partnerships and efforts among the various stakeholders that were spurred by the National Academies report. I look to my own state of Texas, which has a troubled history with false convictions, as an exemplar for forensic science transparency and improvements. If we can do it in Texas, we can do it anywhere.

I look forward to a spirited discussion and to working with my colleagues across the aisle to move bipartisan legislation through this committee. And I thank the expert panel for your testimony today.