

Stalled at the County Line: Organizational Barriers to Vehicle Forensics in Rural Policing

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The Problem: The “Black Box” of Evidence

Modern vehicles are sophisticated digital nodes, generating vast amounts of telematics, navigation, and behavioral data. While this data offers a crucial “digital witness” for criminal investigations, rural law enforcement agencies often lack the budget, training, and technical infrastructure to access it. This creates a “digital divide” where justice depends on a department’s zip code.

Study Objectives

This study investigates the operational gap between **forensic capability** and **investigative need** in Arkansas law enforcement. It seeks to answer:

- To what extent are rural agencies aware of the evidentiary value of vehicle telematics?
- What are the specific fiscal and technical barriers to adopting tools like Berla iVe?
- Does the cost-benefit analysis justify establishing a centralized vehicle forensics hub for resource-constrained agencies?

Methodology

This study utilizes an **Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Design**:

1. **Quantitative Study:** A statewide instrument distributed to 300+ Chiefs of Police and Sheriffs to measure usage rates, budget constraints, and technical aptitude.
2. **Qualitative Interviews:** Semi-structured follow-up interviews with agency heads to explore the decision-making processes regarding technology adoption.
3. **Cost-Benefit Modeling:** A fiscal analysis comparing the “opportunity cost” of lost evidence against the investment required for lab expansion

Impact & Dissemination

By quantifying the “data desert” in rural policing, this research aims to inform state-level funding policy and forensic lab resource allocation.

- **Academic Output:** Manuscript in preparation for the *American Journal of Criminal Justice*
- **Practitioner Briefings:** Anticipated presentation at the **Arkansas Association of Chiefs of Police** and **Arkansas Sheriffs’ Association** conferences.