WISCONSIN STATE CRIME LABORATORIES

MADISON ○ MILWAUKEE ○ WAUSAU

4626 University Ave.
Madison, WI 53705
(608) 266-2031

1578 South 11th St.
Milwaukee, WI 53204
(414) 382-7500

7100 West Stewart Ave.
Wausau, WI 54401
(715) 845-8626

Firearms & Toolmarks Unit FAQ's

Q: Will fuming (super gluing) a firearm for fingerprints harm a firearm submitted for examination?

A: No. Fuming the firearm for fingerprints will not harm the gun for examination and test firing. Most fingerprint process will not harm the firearm. Acid yellow processing is one exception (corrosive to metal).

Q: Can you determine how long it has been since a gun was fired?

A: No. The time since the gun was last fired cannot be accurately determined by firing residue in the barrel or smelling the barrel for firing vapors.

Q: Can I submit a potentially loaded firearm to the lab for examination?

A: Yes, *however…* If you have a firearm you cannot unload or don't know how to unload, please contact the firearms unit for assistance on how to submit the firearm before coming to the laboratory for safety reasons. We may be able to assist you in unloading the firearm or determining if it is loaded prior to submission.

Q: Do I need to submit unfired ammunition for test firing?

A: Normally, no. The lab has an ample supply of available test ammunition for most examinations. However, unfired ammunition may be requested if the firearm is in an obscure caliber where test ammunition may be difficult to find, or if it is needed for distance determination (i.e. muzzle to clothing) where the same ammunition could be beneficial in distance determination test firings.

Q: Can you identify a bullet to a fired cartridge case?

A: No. Most potential markings left on the bullet from the mouth of the cartridge case are obscured from the rifling impressing on the bullet in addition to potential impact/penetration damage.

Q: Can you determine a manufacture or model of a firearm from a photograph or video?

A: No. The similarity of clones and replicas to real firearms makes it difficult to determine the authenticity of a firearm observed on a picture or video. One example is an airsoft AR-15 rifle replica that was so authentic that you could take the airsoft rifle apart and install an AR-15 parts kit on it to build a functional rifle.

Q: What should I do if the firearm is recovered in water (submerged)?

A: Package and store the firearm submerged in water for submission to the lab. Water from the recovery site or tap water is acceptable. Continued submersion can keep the corrosion minimal until the firearm can be examined.

Q: Why is toolmark evidence not accepted without a suspect tool?

A: The variation in how the toolmarks are created (angles, pressures, depths, accelerated tool wear, etc.) make toolmark to toolmark identification difficult. Submission of the tool allows the examiner to create tests to replicate the variations observed for comparison, and can give you the source tool that caused the toolmarks through microscopic identification.

Q: Can you identify photographs to a toolmark to a suspect tool?

A: No. Photos can be helpful in determining how the tool may have been used to attack the evidence item, but they are not usable for microscopic identification comparison.

Q: What does the conclusion "not suitable for identification" mean"?

A: There are no identifying marks left on the evidence item or it is an item that was not in direct contact with the firearm or tool.

Q: What does the conclusion "could not be identified or excluded" mean?

A: There are come characteristics on evidence items similar to each other, but there isn't enough individual information left on the items for identification to a common source. Causes can be impact/penetration damage, insufficient marks present, corrosion, and others.