

# Bullet

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**R**ONNIE LEE BOWLING IS ON KENTUCKY'S DEATH ROW FOR TWO murders he claims he didn't commit. And one of the things that helped put him there was the testimony of an FBI laboratory examiner who said he had "matched" several bullets recovered from the bodies of the two victims to a box of unspent cartridges found in Bowling's mobile home.

There was no other physical evidence tying Bowling to the crimes—no DNA, no fingerprints, no blood, no hair or fibers, no gunshot residue.

In fact, the only direct evidence of Bowling's guilt was the FBI examiner's testimony about the matching bullets and the word of a police informant who testified that Bowling had confessed to the two murders while they were housed together in the same jail.

Bowling contends that he never even spoke to the informant, who had struck a deal with prosecutors to trade testimony in Bowling's state trial in exchange for a favorable disposition of the federal mail fraud charges then pending against him.

And now the FBI examiner's testimony in the case is being called into question by a recent study that raises serious doubts about the validity of the agency's so-called comparative bullet-lead-analysis evidence.

The study, released in February by the National Academies' National Research Council, found that while the FBI's scientific method for comparing bullets was generally sound, its examiners have sometimes overstated its importance in court and played down the likelihood of a false match.

There is no disputing the fact that trace amounts of certain elements in bullet lead can be precisely measured. The controversy centers on how the FBI has interpreted that data.

For decades, FBI examiners operated on the twin assumptions that every batch of bullet lead was compositionally uniform throughout and that no two batches were compositionally alike. So if two bullets were found to have the same concentrations of the same elements, the reasoning went, those bullets must have come from the same batch of lead.

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Can We Really  
Say Where  
a Particular  
Bullet Came  
From?