

CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATION

Detectives and crime scene investigators often think of each other as “highly overrated.” In reality, both are “highly dependent” on the other to successfully solve and prosecute crimes.

*—LIEUTENANT DAVID SWORDS, RETIRED,
SPRINGFIELD, OHIO, POLICE DEPARTMENT*

It's important for writers to know that not all crime scene investigators are sworn police officers. Many years ago, before technology was so very important in police investigations, crime scene investigators were always police officers. Now, many departments hire civilian specialists whose duties are to collect and examine the evidence that's found at various crime scenes. It's easier to separate the two positions—police officer and crime scene investigator—because of the difference in training and salaries. Sworn police officers generally earn the higher salary.

The job description of crime scene investigator is wide-ranging. These highly skilled workers are trained in areas of expertise such as crime scene photography, latent and patent fingerprinting, computer technology and elec-

tronics, blood-spatter examination, firearms and ballistics, and tool and tool-mark examinations. Police detectives, especially homicide detectives, normally receive training in all the above areas.

To understand how a crime scene investigation is conducted, one must understand the difference between a crime scene and the scene of a crime. The scene of the crime is any area where a crime has been committed. A crime scene is an area where evidence from a crime can be found. For example, let's say a store clerk is robbed and killed during a robbery. The store where this incident took place is the scene of the crime.

Hours later, the robber is driving the getaway car down a deserted country road. He rolls down the car window and tosses the murder weapon into the bushes, where it's later found by a farmer. The area where the gun is found is now a crime scene because evidence of a crime is located there. Police detectives seal the area surrounding the gun and gather any evidence that can be found. Both locations are crime scenes, but both aren't the actual scene of the crime.

Investigators handle the scene of a crime differently than crime scenes because the danger level is often higher. Responding officers must be alert for the presence of the perpetrators and their accomplices.

THE CRIME SCENE

Death comes in many forms and is accomplished by many methods. A killer, or would-be killer, sometimes uses a weapon other than the traditional gun or knife. A killing that takes place on the spur of the moment can force a murderer to become quite creative with his choice of weapons.

When approaching a crime scene, officers should never rule out any one object as a potential murder weapon. People have killed with hammers, baseball bats, poisons, electric shocks, knives, forks, needles, drugs, reptiles, automobiles, trains, planes, water, pillows, wire, axes, hatchets, nail guns, screwdrivers, and their bare hands.

At all costs, officers should avoid adrenaline-induced tunnel vision. Once the blue lights begin to flash and the sirens start to wail and yelp, excitement makes it quite easy for officers to lose track of their surroundings. Their heartbeats become rapid, and their tone of speech sometimes climbs another octave (the voice change is evident to anyone who's listened to a police radio or a scanner). However, when officers are traveling to the scene of a crime or a

crime scene, especially a crime in progress, they should always take the time to scan the area on the way. They should look on both sides of the road, on walkways and sidewalks, in parking lots, in neighbors' lawns, beside bushes, in wooded areas, and at passing cars. It's quite possible they'll see the criminal departing the scene or hanging around to watch the police arrive. Criminals often like to watch the police conduct investigations.

Police officers are schooled to protect all evidence, but protecting human life comes first. In most instances, an officer should wait for backup before proceeding into a crime scene, but when someone is ill or injured she may have to enter to administer first aid.

Once an area has been established as a crime scene and they've provided any necessary first aid, officers should set up and secure a perimeter, allowing only necessary personnel—the detectives investigating the case, the medical examiner, and the crime scene and evidence technicians—inside the crime scene. A chief of police, sheriff, and the mayor of the city don't count as necessary people, although they seem to think they are, especially during election years or when members of the press are present.

THE FIRST OFFICER ON THE SCENE

The first officer on the scene of a homicide, or any crime scene, is most often a uniformed patrol officer. The dispatcher receives a 911 telephone call, and he assigns the case to the next patrol officer on the rotation. Depending upon the severity of the crime and the danger level, more than one officer may be assigned to the same case.

Upon her arrival at the scene of a crime, a responding officer must first, if necessary, defend herself or others against attackers. It's then her responsibility to provide first aid to the injured and protect the scene and the remaining victims, or witnesses, from harm. It's her duty to make the necessary arrangements to contact emergency personnel, the medical examiner, the crime scene investigation team, and the detectives on duty or on call.

Each patrol car should be equipped to properly safeguard a crime scene, and each responding officer should have the knowledge and ability to process the entire scene in the event that all detectives or crime scene investigators are busy elsewhere. The following basic crime scene equipment can be found in each responding police vehicle:



Patrol officers carry basic crime scene equipment in the trunks of their vehicles.

- consent-to-search forms
- crime scene barricade tape
- personal protective equipment
- first aid kit
- paper bags
- flashlight
- flares
- notebook or note pad
- tape recorder
- camera
- plastic bags
- knife/scissors
- tape measure
- traffic cones
- hand cleaner
- cell phone

THE CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATOR

Upon arrival at the crime scene, the investigators, or detectives, assume charge of the scene. They may require the assistance of the uniformed officers for perimeter control, crowd control, media access, and security. If they require no further assistance from the uniformed officers, the detective in charge may dismiss them to continue their patrol duties. At this point the investigation begins.

Detectives use a variety of means to solve crimes of all types. Those means can be as simple as speaking with witnesses. Investigators can also use any number of scientific tests to aid them in their quests for a killer's identity.

The chart below describes some of the duties and responsibilities of the crime scene investigator.

DUTY OF A CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATOR	ACTION TAKEN
Respond to the call.	Record time, date, and location. Record names of all persons present.
Establish the perimeter.	Assure that the scene is safe and first aid is rendered. Seal the area. Allow no one to enter or leave unless authorized by detectives.
Survey the crime scene.	Determine the type of search to be used. Call for assistance if needed.
Check the body for signs of life and for evidence of the murder method.	Check the pulse, pupils (touch eyes for response), bleeding, wounds, livor mortis, and rigor mortis.
Respond to the medical examiner's arrival.	Note the time of arrival. Also note the medical examiner's opinion as to the cause of death. Arrange to meet with the medical examiner for autopsy, etc. Arrange to obtain a copy of the death certificate.
Photograph the crime scene.	Take overall photographs of the scene from all angles.

<p>Make a crime scene sketch.</p>	<p>Take measurements and sketch the crime scene, identifying each item of evidence.</p>
<p>Note all observations of the scene.</p>	<p>Light switches on or off, weather, heat settings, windows open or closed, doors locked or unlocked, pets, ashtrays and contents, beverages, food, refrigerator and freezer contents, food in the oven or microwave, mail, computers, answering machine messages, TV/radio on or off, cell phone/pager messages, address books, cash, credit cards, etc.</p>
<p>Look for the obvious.</p>	<p>Sometimes we get caught up in the excitement and overlook simple things, such as a wallet left by the killer on an end table, or a medicine bottle prescribed to a person other than the victim or the victim's family.</p>
<p>Look for things that should be there but aren't.</p>	<p>Wallets, watches, keys, wills, purses and pocket-books, children, pets, firearms, etc.</p>