

# Searching and Examining a Major Case Crime Scene

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## I. The Initial Death Scene Examination

The crime scene examination and subsequent search should be done in a careful and methodical manner. After talking to the officer(s) who were the first ones on the scene and learning from them of any changes that might have been made to the scene since their arrival, such as turning lights on or off or opening doors or windows, start the examination by working your way into the body using great care to avoid disturbing or destroying any evidence as you do. Carefully observe the floor or ground surrounding the body. Look for items of evidence or of evidential value such as stains, marks, etc. Remember to look up too, every crime scene is 3 dimensional. Another technique to you assist in locating evidence is to shine a flashlight on the ground at an oblique angle. Yes, even in the daytime. Look at the items as they are located. Pay close attention to everything as you approach the body at this time, do not dismiss anything until its evidentiary value can be determined. Are there any footprints or drag marks? Is there anything on the floor or ground that may be stepped on or destroyed?

Only one investigator at a time should approach the body! Determine what, if anything, has been moved or altered by the suspect(s) or anyone else prior to your arrival. Has the body been moved? If so, by whom and for what reason?

***Never move or alter the positioning of the body!*** Make close visual examinations of the body and the area immediately around it. Look between the arms and legs without moving them. Look at the arms, hands and fingers. Are there defense wounds? Is there anything under the nails that you can see at this time? If you can, try to determine the cause of death and the instrument or method used. Take careful notes of the external appearance of the body and the clothing or lack of clothing. Look at or for lividity, decomposition, direction of blood flow patterns, remember the law of gravity. Is the blood flow consistent with it? Make ***detailed*** notes.

Describe the clothing, and especially the condition of the clothing. Do folds or rolls indicate the body had been dragged? If so, in what direction? Note those folds and rolls, diagram them then photograph them. They could assist you in determining the method of transportation or placement of the body at the location where it was found. There could be trace evidence in the folds and rolls too.

Describe the location and appearance of wounds, bruises, etc. Make careful and detailed observations. Describe not only what you see, but also what you do not see! Forget about what you think you see! If something is missing, note it. For example, if you observe an area on the wrist that is not tanned by the sun, note it. DO NOT state that a wristwatch is missing. What if the victim had an I.D. bracelet or sweatband on instead? Never ASSUME! Examine the scene for the presence and absence of blood. If any is located, note the amount, size and shape of the drops and degree of coagulation or separation of it. Photograph it using a scale and always taking the pictures from a 90 degree angle.

At this time, you should be making a sketch of the scene. It can be a rough, freehand sketch drawn on a blank piece of paper or in your notebook. You should include in the sketch things like the location of all doors, windows, furniture, the victim and anything else you feel it is necessary to document. A sketch should be made in all murder cases and any other case involving a death where there is any question of cause or at the discretion of the investigator. Measurements can then be made of the location to show the size of the area drawn, the width and height of doors, windows, tables, the bed or any other items needed. This will also geographically locate the victim's body and items of evidence within the scene. If the investigator is reasonably sure this is not a natural death and he/she is going to proceed with the investigation as if it is a murder, then at a later date, a detailed formal diagram should be drawn using drafting tools, a scale and a uniform format. Photos of the scene can give a distorted view of the relationship of the body to other fixed objects due to camera angle, size of lens, lighting, etc. To accurately depict the scene it is possible to use photos in conjunction with the finished diagram. Something to keep in mind about the sketch is this, you should have enough information in it so you could give it to another investigator and that person would be able to complete a finished diagram without the need to revisit the scene.

## II. Photographs

The investigator should have the photographer, if one is available, or, if not that lucky, then the investigator himself should ensure that;

- Overall photos of the scene are taken to show the approach to the area, street signs, street light locations in relation to the actual scene, street addresses and identifying objects at the scene. Pictures should also be taken of every room in the house, even if their relationship to the crime scene is not readily apparent.

- Photograph the scene in a clockwise pattern before altering the body's position or any other evidence within the scene. Photograph the scene from at least 2 opposite corners, but from all four corners is even better. This way, nothing is missed or hidden from view by intervening objects.
- Photograph the body and the immediate vicinity around the body. If you have a camera boom, take pictures from ceiling height down of the victim and any other evidence. This perspective often shows things missed when viewed from ground or eye level.
- Keep a photo log.

Another idea to keep in mind when photographing the exterior of an indoor scene or an exterior scene is to take photos of the spectators who are standing around watching the activities. Many times the perpetrator will return to observe the actions of the police or fire personnel. This seems to be especially true in arson cases. Additionally, photos may help identify reluctant witnesses who can be identified and interviewed at a later time.

Once the photos are taken, the investigator should now make a detailed examination of the victim. Are the eyes and/or mouth open or closed, what is the color of skin, of the nails and hands or lips. The presence or absence of blood, saliva, vomit, lung purge, their direction and flow. The best idea is to begin at the head and work down to the feet. Look for cuts, bruises, stab wounds or bullet holes. Document maggot activity if present. When the body is moved, check the underside of the body for wounds and underneath the body for items of an evidentiary value. Record the temperature of the body, the surface it is laying on, and the interface area between the two. Obtain the ambient temperature. If a maggot mass is present, take the temperature of the mass.

Do not attempt to learn the victims identity by going through the pockets of the victims clothing. If his/her identity cannot be established by other means at the scene, the investigator can obtain this information when it is made available at the Medical Examiners office later. Identification photos and finger and palm prints should be taken at the Medical Examiners office too. In some jurisdictions these things can be done at the scene. If the Medical Examiner is comfortable with the competency of the crime scene investigators or if their forensic investigators are present to observe and document the actions of the crime scene investigators, some Medical Examiners will not have a problem with these things being done at the scene.

### III. Notifying the Medical Examiner

The crime scene investigator, the detective or the supervisor on the scene should notify the medical examiner of the type of death case they are investigating. Since the determination of cause and manner of death often depends on the evidence recovered at the scene, the Medical Examiner may elect to respond to the scene personally or send one of his forensic investigators in his place.

The agency's relationship with the Medical Examiners office is crucial to the successful investigation of any case. A relationship of trust and honesty is essential. Since any investigation requires a team effort, steps must be taken to ensure that a harmonious atmosphere is in place and remains that way.

There are certain notifications that must be made during the preliminary investigation. The Medical Examiners Office should be notified and apprised of the situation as soon as possible after a murder has been discovered. They should also be notified if there is any unattended or suspicious death being investigated. If any change in status in the case occurs, they should be made aware of it. Florida law charges the Medical Examiner with determining the cause and manner of death in any case that he deems necessary, including but not limited to murder, unattended death cases, suicides and cases involving communicable diseases or public health hazards. The prompt notification will also result in the timely arrival of trained professionals who can assist the investigator in the determination of an approximate time of death.

### IV. Continuing the Search

Search the immediate area around the body (divide the room into a grid and work outward from the body). Have another investigator retrace your steps and recheck the grids for any missed evidence. **REMEMBER**, all scenes are three dimensional, never forget to look up too! Do not touch areas or articles which have the possibility of being processed for latent fingerprints.

Expand the search to the remainder of the building or scene. Personal notepads, diaries, phone books and answering machines or the tapes in them are good sources of information. Check the caller I.D. unit. Missing personal belongings or items that have been moved or removed may provide valuable information.

The scope or intensity of the search of the scene depends on the particular situation and the conditions present. It would be difficult to proceed with a detailed examination of a scene without adequate lighting. To do so would probably result in the overlooking of evidence or the destruction of trace or latent evidence. It is impossible to describe all the possibilities which could occur in an

improper search of a scene. In the end, it depends on the training, experience and judgement of the investigator and upon the same factors relating to those he/she calls on to assist. One final note, be cognizant of someones expectation of privacy or legal standing. If that possibility exists, a search warrant or written consent to search must be obtained.

## V. Fingerprint Evidence

Latent prints are left by the contact of the palmar surfaces of the hands and/or bare feet of a person are probably the most valuable piece of evidence at any crime scene. The term "latent" means hidden, not visible. However, for the purpose of this instruction, a latent print is considered as one which is obtained in conjunction with an investigation involving a possible identification. There are three main types of prints which may be obtained in an investigation, they are; 1) visible or patent prints, 2) molded or plastic prints and 3) latent prints.

Visible or Patent Prints are those prints which have been made by transferring a foreign substance, such as ink, blood, grease or dust from the crests of the papillary ridges to the surface of the object touched. The most common type is the dust print. When a finger comes in contact with a thin layer of dust, some of the dust sticks to the friction ridges. When the finger subsequently comes in contact with or against a clean surface, a fingerprint results or, when the finger is removed from the surface, the ridges pull away the dust, leaving the fingerprint. This print in some cases may be so clear that it can be successfully searched in a single fingerprint file.

An excellent print may also be left when the finger is contaminated by other substances such as ink, soot, flour, paint, facial oils, etc. Fingerprints in blood are not uncommon in murder investigations, but can be indistinct and less reliable for identification. They could require chemical enhancement to make them identifiable.

Molded or Plastic Prints are those prints that occur when the finger touches or presses against a soft pliable surface such as putty, wax, an adhesive, grease, drying paint, blood or soap. Impressions in the skin of a deceased victim have also been observed. A negative or reversed impression of the friction ridge pattern is thereby produced as a molded or plastic print. Such a print may also be found in paint or recently painted objects or surfaces.

Latent Prints are those prints made by natural skin secretions such as perspiration, sebaceous oils and dirt being deposited on an object touched from the details in the friction ridge patterns. Latent prints are usually found on objects with smooth, polished surfaces or on paper. Under favorable conditions, however, they may also appear on rougher surfaces like tightly woven materials, starched fabrics, vegetation, wood or even human skin.

Photographing Prints found at the scene should always be photographed prior to attempting to lift them. This is recommended since it is much easier to introduce print evidence into court if it has been recorded. Especially since parts of the object on which the print was located will also be visible in the photograph. If a good lift is obtained during the investigation and it is identified as being that of the suspect, it may be necessary to have the photograph enlarged. Copies of the photos can also be made available for the attorneys and jurors. When taking the photos of the prints, always use a scale or other measuring device and take the photo at a 90 degree angle to the surface to prevent any distortion to the print when it is being photographed. Make sure the scale is visible in the picture and that the inches or metric notation is visible. It is also a good habit to indicate where up is in the picture since the orientation of the print can be useful information.

Prints from sources other than fingers are also obtained at crime scenes. While it is usually true that more fingerprints are obtained in investigations than prints from any other papillary skin surface, it should be mentioned that any palmar (palm, wrist) or plantar (foot, toe) skin designs can also serve to positively identify the suspect. In some cases, lip and ear prints have also been recovered.

## VI. Expanding the Search

Once the investigators have completed their examination and the body has been removed, the investigators should take time to systematically check the remainder of the house, business, vehicle or location and carefully note items of evidence or conditions which may shed any additional light on the investigation. These can include;

1. Doors, are they locked or bolted (from the inside or outside), are there marks of forced entry, does the doorbell work, is there a doorknocker, are there scratches around the keyhole, etc.
2. Windows, what type, are they locked or unlocked, open or broken, note the type and position of curtains, drapes or blinds.
3. Newspapers and mail, is the mail unopened or read or not, check the postmarks on envelopes and the dates of newspapers.
4. Lights, which ones were on when the crime was discovered, how are they controlled, by timers, motion sensors or switches. Can they be seen from the outside. Are the bulbs broken or unscrewed?

5. Smells, do you or did the first responding officer notice the smell of gas, tobacco, alcohol, perfume, gun powder or anything else unusual.
6. Kitchens, was food being prepared, if so, what kind (it may or may not correspond with the victims stomach contents). Is there food that was partially eaten, utensils, glasses or plates. Is the stove warm or still on, Are there signs of attempts to burn or wash away evidence. Are there signs of clean up attempts.
7. Heating/Air Conditioners, what type is it, is it vented or unvented (carbon monoxide can kill). What is the thermostat setting.
8. Are there signs of a party, such as empty bottles (note the labels, brands, types of liquor, etc.) are there cups, glasses and what is their contents, how many are there, is lipstick on any of them, how many places are set at the table.
9. Note contents of ashtrays, cigarette packs and butts, brands, the way in which the cigarettes were extinguished, is there tooth marks or lipstick on them. Remember, DNA is easily obtained from the butts, preserve them properly.
10. Contents of waste baskets and trash cans, has anyone been going through them looking for anything, is the trash in proper order (dates on newspapers, letters, etc.).
11. Clocks and watches, are they wind-up or electric. Are they running, do they show the right time, what time are alarm clocks set for. Check timers on VCR's, microwave ovens, etc.
12. Bathrooms and vanities, are towels, rags etc. damp to touch or dry. Are they bloodstained. Check for signs that the suspect cleaned up afterwards or was injured and bled at the scene. Is the toilet seat and lid left up? In a womans house, this could be a piece of important information. Check medicine cabinets for drugs, check the tanks of toilets, that is a great place to hide things.
13. General disorder, is there evidence of a struggle, is the place just dirty, etc.
14. Shootings, how many bullets were fired, account for all of them if possible, find cartridge cases (number and location found) if there are any bullet holes (number and location), was the weapon left at the scene. There may be expended cartridge casings found laying on the floor, rug or on furniture. It is recommended to mark these items, after photographing them first, with numbered markers to prevent their being moved, altered or damaged. If necessary, they may be protected by placing water glasses over them.
15. Stabbing and beatings, was the instrument left at the scene, could it have come from that location or was it brought to the scene by the suspect.
16. Blood, document the location, degree of coagulation, type (spots, stains, spatters, pooling, etc.). Sketch and photograph the bloodstains. Remember, when a body fluid begins to decompose, it will discharge a reddish brown fluid which resembles blood, when describing this, be objective, call it what it is, a reddish brown fluid. Bloodspatter analysis may be used to reconstruct violent crimes. Carefully photograph all blood patterns using scales. DO NOT cover up patterns with the scales if possible. Remember, always look up, cast-off spatter will probably be on the ceiling.
17. Hangings and strangulation, what instrument or means was used, was it obtained in the house or brought to the scene, are there any portions remaining. If a suspected auto-erotic death, look for signs of prior activities such as rope marks on door frames or rafters. Be prepared for scene re-arranging by ashamed family members. Remember, do not cut the victim down if he/she is obviously dead until all aspects of the investigation have been covered. Never cut through the knot and always use a piece of string tied to each end of the cut to re-connect the circle.
18. Look at stairs, hallways, entries and exits to the scene, check for footprints, debris, discarded items and fingerprints. Attempt to determine the route used to enter and exit the scene by the suspect and avoid contaminating it.
19. Presence of items that do not belong there, many suspects, in the heat of the moment, will leave items of great evidential value, don't overlook this possibility.
20. Is there signs of ransacking, to what degree, if any, has the scene been ransacked. Was anything taken (relatives and friends can assist in making this determination).
21. Look for hiding places for weapons which the suspect may have had to conceal quickly, check behind stoves, on top of tall furniture, behind books, among bedclothes, under the mattress, on the roof.

## VII. Personal Information

Is the victim married or in a relationship? Determine as much about the state of the marriage or relationship as possible, for example, abuse, infidelity on either partners part, drug or alcohol abuse, monetary problems. Is there a suicide note, if so does it appear genuine

or staged? Process for prints, get handwriting samples from the other occupants of the location. Has the victim threatened suicide recently, has he/she been despondent, what has happened recently to prompt or preclude such actions? Check the victim's computer.

## VIII. Curious Onlookers at the Scene

Many additional problems are caused by curious onlookers at the scene when a body is discovered. The major concern is, of course, to protect the scene from destruction or contamination by onlookers and curious police officers. The latter group usually presents the most problems. Police Officers are naturally curious and generally have to see things for themselves. Detailed follow-up investigations of many crimes have revealed that various items initially thought to be of great evidential value were actually left by curious police officers.

It will never be known how much valuable time has been wasted and how much evidence has been destroyed by the mere presence of policemen. Just standing around or leaning against a doorway may grind evidence into the ground or smear a good fingerprint. The investigator should explain these facts to the officers present and if the officers are not needed, request that they leave the scene. Most officers are cooperative and no difficulty should be encountered if the matter is presented properly. Occasionally, a problem presents itself when a high-ranking officer appears on the scene. If it becomes apparent that their presence could result in the destruction of evidence, their cooperation should be elicited in leaving the scene. The use of a log or name list of everyone entering the crime scene also helps discourage the curious. When good latent fingerprints are found, every person who has been present at the scene, including the victim, must be fingerprinted for identification and/or elimination purposes.

The police should use tact and courtesy when dealing with civilian witnesses and crowds. This approach serves several purposes. It will gain as much cooperation from people as possible under the circumstances and it may result in a witness, who is an onlooker, coming forward with valuable information. This is especially important in areas where past experiences indicate that the hostility of onlookers is easily aroused. In some situations, the mood of the crowd may become so ugly that the police are forced to leave the scene before they can complete their investigation.

Populated areas, usually consist of streets, sidewalks, communities, etc. and requires the presence of officers to protect the scene. If not, physical barriers such as crime scene tape, vehicles or sawhorses may be needed. In some cases, a detailed search of an entire area may be necessary. This can be done most effectively by cordoning off the area and dividing it into manageable sections to be searched individually. Remember, when setting the boundaries of the crime scene, make it cover as large an area as possible. It is much easier to shrink it down later than to try to expand it once the boundaries have been established. And a news cameraman is standing where you want to expand the scene to.

To avoid destroying evidence in areas of heavy weed or brush, a pathway may be marked off using string or flags and used as the sole entrance and exit to the scene until the search is finished. The pathway should be carefully examined first to ensure no evidence is lost.

Officers should never overlook the potential of any items found at or near the scene. Investigators should conduct a neighborhood canvass for witnesses.

In Rural Settings, many problems will present themselves that are found in urban settings. These are handled in the same manner as an urban investigation. However, there can be significant differences in a rural setting, these could include,

- Accessibility or the lack of it. Are 4 wheel drive vehicles needed? Can it only be reached by boat or helicopter? Do you need to pack all your equipment in with you?
- Length of time a body has been there prior to discovery. This will cause many changes to the scene such as decomposition, animal activity and weather related destruction of the evidence.
- Use care not to disturb the ground that may have footprints or tire marks imbedded in it.
- Employ aerial photography. It will provide information about routes or egress and exit to the area, traffic patterns and location of homes, etc. This is true in both rural and urban settings.

## IX. Evidence

As a rule, in the absence of a crime scene investigator, the removal and submission of evidence should be restricted to the lead investigator or lead uniform officer. When evidence is discovered by persons other than the investigator, these items should be, if possible, pointed out to the investigator for his collection and removal to avoid a long list of witnesses or links in the ever growing chain of custody needed for court at a later date. Remember if the scene is being worked by a crime scene investigator, that is his/her scene. They are in command of the scene itself. All other law enforcement personnel present are there to assist that investigator.

There can be situations where the finder of the evidence should collect and log it rather than give it to the investigator. This will reduce the chain of custody but still requires the finder to advise the investigator of its discovery, location and identity. Any evidence so moved must be photographed first.

Evidence can be marked for proper identification. This can be nothing more than the recording of a serial number or the physical placement of your unique mark directly on the item. If marking items, make sure you do not cause the destruction of latent prints or other marks such as tool marks or ballistic identifiers. When submitting evidence;

1. Give a complete description of all evidence submitted including, date, time, location recovered and who recovered it.
2. Illustrate the chain of custody and indicate who will be needed to testify in court about that specific piece of evidence and why.
3. If a search warrant was obtained, include that information.
4. List the evidence recovered in a chronological order and include the exact location of recovery. This could include measurements.

## **X. Finally**

The previously listed suggestions are provided as a basic guideline and are the opinion of the author. They are based on his experience, training and observations. They are not meant to be an exhaustive, complete list of actions to be taken at a crime scene. Each scene is unique. Each scene requires detailed and complete processing techniques. If you rely on the training you have received, the observation of others working their scenes and the lessons learned from working previous scenes of your own, you will continue to grow and evolve, providing your jurisdiction with the finest possible work product you are capable of producing.

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