

The Basics of Crime Scene Investigation

Crime scene investigation is much more than processing (searching) and documenting (notes, photos, sketches), and it's certainly more than collecting and preserving evidence. When done right, crime scene investigation is a slow, methodical, systematic, and orderly process that involves *protocols* and a processing *methodology*. It's far too important in the overall investigative process for investigators to take shortcuts to get the scene working and functional again, especially if it's an area of commerce. Having a method or a plan of attack protects against claims that the scene was contaminated or "botched."

Establishing and protecting the boundaries of a crime scene are often the most difficult tasks. Setting boundaries can be arbitrary, but the most common distinction is made between inner and outer perimeter. There are mathematical concepts that refer to when one decides to draw a circle around a box; the outer perimeter of the circle may be 50 percent larger than the inner perimeter of the box. An *inner perimeter* is the immediate area where the crime was committed. An *outer perimeter*, for example, would be the surrounding area that includes any entry and exit points, or in the case of a shooting, any area where spent ammunition might be found.

Stabilizing a crime scene is also important. One of the most frequent concerns is whether one should immediately rush into the scene and check for signs of life in the victim. After all, most textbooks emphasize that a first responder's duty includes first aid. Although policy will dictate how such decisions will be made, the hard-and-fast rule is that removal of potential threats to self and others (fellow officers and citizens) takes precedence over first aid to those already inside the crime scene. If the victim is still alive, an effort should be made to take a dying declaration. In any case, every effort should be made not to disturb the crime scene and to preserve it in as pristine a condition as possible. The point of all such cautions in the above illustrations is to recognize that crime scene investigation is both science and art. Science provides the foundation of principles, protocols, and techniques. The art is the application of each. It's important to keep this idea in mind as you progress through this course.



OBJECTIVES

When you complete this lesson, you'll be able to

- Explain the objective of crime scene investigation
- Describe the basic approaches to such investigation
- Understand and explain the nature of evidence
- Identify the specific objectives of documentation
- Explain the concept of *processing methodology*

ASSIGNMENT 1: INTRODUCTION TO CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATION

Read pages 1–23 in your textbook, *Practical Crime Scene Processing and Investigation*. Then read Assignment 1 in this study guide, and complete 1.0 Introduction at the LabSim website.

Many investigators hesitate to use the “checklist” approach to something as important as criminal investigation. The problem is that there will always be someone who follows the checklist so closely that he or she never learns anything, but is capable of going through the motions. Crime scene analysis is so situation- and logic-dependent that it can defy standardization. In any case, checklists can be very helpful in the beginning of the learning curve and are frequently used by inexperienced as well as experienced investigators. Likewise, checklist or not, there are basics that apply to all crime scenes, regardless of the investigators’ experience level.

One of the most important aspects is securing the crime scene to preserve the scene with minimal contamination and disturbance of physical evidence. The initial response to an incident should be expeditious and methodical. After arrival, the officer should assess the scene and treat the incident as a crime scene. The initial responding officer should approach and enter crime scenes, remaining observant of any persons, vehicles, events, potential evidence, and environmental conditions.

The officer should do the following:

1. Note or log dispatch information (for example, address/ location, time, date, type of call, and parties involved).
2. Note any persons or vehicles leaving the crime scene.
3. Approach the scene cautiously, scan the entire area to thoroughly assess the scene, and note any possible secondary crime scenes, paying attention to any persons or vehicles in the vicinity that may be related to the crime.
4. Make initial observations (look, listen, smell) to assess the scene and ensure officer safety before proceeding.
5. Remain alert and attentive. Assume that the crime is ongoing until determined to be otherwise.
6. Treat the location as a crime scene until assessed and determined to be otherwise.

It's important for the initial responding officer to be observant when approaching, entering, and exiting a crime scene.

Next, the safety and physical well-being of officers and other individuals, in and around the crime scene, are the initial responding officer's first priority. Thus, the initial responding officer should do the following:

1. Ensure that there's no immediate threat to other responders—scan area for sights, sounds, and smells that may present danger to personnel (for example, hazardous materials such as gasoline or natural gas). If the situation involves a clandestine drug laboratory, biological weapons, or radiological or chemical threats, the appropriate personnel/agency should be contacted prior to entering the scene.
2. Approach the scene in a manner designed to reduce risk of harm to the officer while maximizing the safety of victims, witnesses, and others in the area.
3. Survey the scene for dangerous persons and control the situation.
4. Notify supervisory personnel and call for assistance/ backup if necessary.

After controlling any dangerous situations or persons, the initial responding officer's next responsibility is to ensure that medical attention is provided to injured persons while minimizing contamination of the scene. The initial responding officer should do the following:

1. Assess the victim or victims for signs of injuries and life and provide immediate medical attention.
2. Call for medical personnel.
3. Guide medical personnel to the victim to minimize contamination/alteration of the crime scene.
4. Point out potential physical evidence to medical personnel, instruct them to minimize contact with such evidence (e.g., ensure that medical personnel preserve all clothing and personal effects without cutting through bullet holes, knife tears), and document movement of persons or items by medical personnel.
5. Instruct medical personnel not to "clean up" the scene and to avoid removal or alteration of items originating from the scene.
6. If medical personnel arrived first, obtain the name, unit, and telephone number of attending personnel, and the name and location of the medical facility where the victim is to be taken.
7. If there's a chance the victim may die, attempt to obtain a "dying declaration."
8. Document any statements/comments made by victims, suspects, or witnesses at the scene.
9. If the victim or suspect is transported to a medical facility, a law enforcement official should accompany the victim or suspect to document any comments made and preserve evidence. (If no officers are available to accompany the victim/suspect, stay at the scene and request that medical personnel preserve evidence and document any comments made by the victim or suspect.)

Controlling, identifying, and removing persons at the crime scene and limiting the number of persons who enter the crime scene and the movement of such persons is the next important function of the initial responding officer in protecting the crime scene. The initial responding officer should do the following:

- Control all individuals at the scene—prevent individuals from altering/destroying physical evidence by restricting movement, location, and activity while ensuring and maintaining safety at the scene.
- Identify all individuals at the scene, such as suspects (secure and separate), witnesses (secure and separate), bystanders, victims/family/friends (control while showing compassion), and medical and other assisting personnel. If the individual is a witness, treat as above; if not, remove from the scene.
- Exclude unauthorized and nonessential personnel from the scene (law enforcement officials not working the case, politicians, media).

Next, defining and controlling boundaries provide a means for protecting and securing the crime scene. The number of crime scenes and their boundaries are determined by their location(s) and the type of crime. Boundaries should be established beyond the initial scope of the crime scene(s) with the understanding that the boundaries can be reduced in size if necessary but may not be as easily expanded. Officers should do the following:

1. Identify potential points and paths of exit and entry of suspects and witnesses as well as places where the victim/evidence may have been moved (be aware of trace and impression evidence while assessing the scene).
2. Set up physical barriers (ropes, cones, crime scene barrier tape, available vehicles, personnel, other equipment) or use existing boundaries (doors, walls, gates).
3. Document the entry/exit of all people entering and leaving the scene after boundaries have been established.
4. Control the flow of personnel and animals entering and leaving the scene to maintain integrity of the scene.

5. Effect measures to preserve/protect evidence that may be lost or compromised (protect from the elements [rain, snow, wind] and from footsteps, tire tracks, and sprinklers).
6. Document the original location of the victim or objects that you observe being moved.
7. Consider search and seizure issues to determine the necessity of obtaining consent to search and/or obtain a search warrant. Persons shouldn't smoke, chew tobacco, use the telephone or bathroom, eat or drink, move any items (including weapons) unless necessary for the safety and well-being of persons at the scene, adjust the thermostat or open windows or doors (maintain scene as found), touch anything unnecessarily (note and document any items moved), reposition moved items, litter, or spit within the established boundaries of the scene. Establishing boundaries is a critical aspect in controlling the integrity of evidentiary material.

Although the above steps may seem all-inclusive, they're basic. Also, most police agencies won't have the luxury of specialized units. Therefore, it's important that all certified officers have a good basic knowledge of crime scene protocols and procedures.



Self-Check 1

At the end of each section of *Crime Scene Investigation Basics*, you'll be asked to pause and check your understanding of what you've just read by completing a "Self-Check" exercise. Answering these questions will help you review what you've studied so far. Please complete *Self-Check 1* now.

1. What are the two basic goals of law enforcement personnel?

2. When crime prevention fails, police next attempt to _____ crime.

3. Anything that tends to prove or disprove a fact in contention is called _____.

4. What are the two values of evidence?

5. Destruction of material results in the loss of _____ value.

6. The evidence linkage triangle focuses on what aspects?

7. _____ are those changes to the scene or evidence that occur with some regularity.

8. _____ manifest themselves through the investigator's ability to physically place them at the scene in question.

Check your answers with those on page 65. Your instructor will evaluate your LabSim work.
