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The Importance of the Crime Scene

By Charles M. Alifano, NYPD Captain, retired

There are certain basic objectives that the criminal investigation attempts (hopes) to achieve. More specifically, during the homicide investigation, there are at least five (5) areas that can be effected (impacted) either positively or negatively, depending upon how the initial crime scene is; *Identified, Established, Preserved and Processed*. In many cases the initial crime scene (often referred to as the primary scene, however the initial scene may not always be the primary scene and there are often times secondary crime scenes), forms the basis or foundation for the ensuing criminal investigation and the subsequent prosecution.

In the absence of statements, admissions, confessions and/or witnesses; the crime scene may in fact be the sole source of evidentiary matter necessary to determine the following:

The Identity of the Victim...

Who is this person? Is he/she innocent or possibly culpable in his/her own demise? Or is there any indication that this individual was involved in any criminal conduct that may have caused or materially contributed in part to his/her death?

The How, What and Why...

How did this death occur? Can the manner of death be accurately determined (gunshot, knife wound, blunt trauma, toxin ingestion, asphyxiation, etc...)? What is (was) the motive (street robbery, domestic quarrel, drug or gang dispute, the random act of an emotionally disturbed person, revenge, murder for hire, thrill seeker, money, love, sex)? Why did this death occur? What are the possible reasons why someone would cause the death of this person?

Mental Culpability...

Was this death the result of an intentional or reckless act? Was it caused by negligence? Was it some how accidental in nature? Or was this a suicide?

Who is (are) the Offender(s)...

Was this act committed by a single person or multiple individuals? Are the potential offenders (suspects) both physically and mentally capable of performing (carrying out) this act? Is there a possible self-defense issue?

Evidence...

First and foremost, the crime scene investigator must have the skills and ability to recognize and identify potential evidence. He or she must then be able to properly recover (collect) that evidence. This evidence can be anything from clothing and weapons to chemicals, DNA and/or trace compounds; each of which must be treated (handled) uniquely so as to maintain and preserve its integrity for analysis and the subsequent court proceedings. Some times even more importantly, especially during a trial, is the proper recording (documenting) of such evidence and the steps and/or methods utilized to collect, analyze and preserve such evidence.

Documenting the existence of evidence and its relationship to the scene and ultimately to the actual crime takes many forms. The most obvious and oldest method commonly used is the written document, the written report and notes. Usually, along with the written report, are the hand drawn diagrams of the scene. Of course, modern crime scene documentation includes photography and videotape technology. Today's crime scene investigator/technician utilizes the above methods as well as computer-assisted programs designed to produce crime scene diagrams and create virtual depictions.

After necessary analysis, all evidence and related documentation must be pristinely preserved for presentation in subsequent court proceedings. The evidence collected at the scene can positively contribute to the achievement of all the objectives mentioned above. When establishing and processing a crime scene, very specific and methodical procedures should be followed, however tedious and painstakingly slow the process may be. The evidence collected may, often times, be of a delicate and environmentally sensitive nature; such as blood, DNA, hair and serology, for example. Trace evidence and other chemical compounds require strict scientific analysis which mandate extremely deliberate recovery methods. Caution and patience should prevail throughout this process.

We should always remember that the crime scene may be the only and final avenue of communication for the innocent homicide victim.