

Crime Scene Search Parameters

– as taken from the 'Handbook of Forensic Science 2003' (p. 155-168)

A crime scene search is planned, coordinated, and executed by law enforcement officials to locate physical evidence.

Basic Premises

- The best search options are usually the most difficult and time-consuming.
- Physical evidence cannot be over-documented.
- There are two search approaches:
 - A cautious search of visible areas, avoiding evidence loss or contamination.
 - A vigorous search of concealed areas.

Preparation

- Obtain a search warrant, if necessary.
- Discuss the search with involved personnel before arriving at the scene, if possible.
- Establish a command headquarters for communication and decision making in major or complicated crime scene searches.
- Ensure that personnel are aware of the types of evidence usually encountered and the proper handling of the evidence.
- Make preliminary personnel assignments before arriving at the scene, if possible.
- Ensure that assignments are in keeping with the attitude, aptitude, training, and experience of search personnel. Personnel may be assigned two or more responsibilities:
 - Person in charge
 - Ensure scene security.
 - Prepare administrative log.
 - Conduct preliminary survey (initial walk-through).
 - Prepare narrative description.
 - Resolve problems.
 - Make final decisions.
 - Photographer
 - Photograph and log evidence and scene.
 - Sketch Preparer
 - Sketch and log scene.
 - Evidence Recorder
 - Evidence custodian and log evidence.
- Establish communication among the medical examiner, laboratory personnel, and prosecuting attorneys so that questions arising during the crime scene search can be resolved.
- Coordinate agreements with all agencies in multijurisdictional crime scene searches.
- Accumulate evidence collection and packaging materials and equipment.
- Prepare the paperwork to document the search.
- Provide protective clothing, communication, lighting, shelter, transportation, equipment, food, water, medical assistance, and security for search personnel.
- In prolonged searches, use shifts of two or more teams. Transfer paperwork and responsibility in a preplanned manner from one team to the next.

Approach

- Be alert for evidence.
- Take extensive notes.
- Consider the safety of all personnel.

Secure and Protect

- Take control of the scene immediately.
- Determine the extent to which the scene has been protected. Obtain information from personnel who have knowledge of the original condition.
- Designate one person in charge for final decision making and problem resolution.
- Continue to take extensive notes.
- Keep out unauthorized personnel.
- Record who enters and leaves.

Preliminary Survey

The preliminary survey is an organizational stage to plan for the search.

- Cautiously walk through the scene.
- Maintain administrative and emotional control.
- Select a narrative technique (written, audio, or video).
- Take preliminary photographs.
- Delineate the extent of the search area. Usually expand the initial perimeter.
- Organize methods and procedures.
- Recognize special problem areas.
- Identify and protect transient physical evidence.
- Determine personnel and equipment needs. Make specific arrangements.
- Develop a general theory of the crime.
- Take extensive notes to document the scene, physical and environmental conditions, and personnel movements.

Evaluate Physical Evidence Possibilities

This evaluation begins upon arriving at the scene and becomes detailed in the preliminary survey stage.

- Ensure that the collection and packaging materials and equipment are sufficient.
- Focus first on evidence that could be lost. Leave the least transient evidence last.
- Ensure all personnel consider the variety of possible evidence, not only evidence within their specialties.
- Search the easily accessible areas and progress to out-of-view locations. Look for hidden items.
- Evaluate whether evidence appears to have been moved inadvertently.
- Evaluate whether the scene appears contrived.

Narrative

The narrative is a running description of the crime scene.

- Use a systematic approach in the narrative.
- Nothing is insufficient to record if it catches one's attention.
- Under most circumstances, do not collect evidence during the narrative.
- Use photographs and sketches to supplement, not substitute for, the narrative.
- The narrative should include the following:
 - Case identifier.
 - Date, time, and location.
 - Weather and lighting conditions.
 - Identity and assignments of personnel.
 - Condition and position of evidence.

Photography

- Photograph the crime scene as soon as possible.
- Prepare a photographic log that records all photographs and a description and location of evidence.
- Establish a progression of overall, medium, and close-up views of the crime scene.
- Photograph from eye level to represent the normal view.
- Photograph the most fragile areas of the crime scene first.
- Photograph the condition of evidence before recovery.
- Photograph the evidence in detail and include a scale, the photographer's name, and the date.
- Take all photographs intended for examination purposes with a scale. When a scale is used, first take a photograph without the scale.
- Photograph the interior crime scene in an overlapping series using a normal lens, if possible. Overall photographs may be taken using a wide-angle lens.
- Photograph the exterior crime scene, establishing the location of the scene by a series of overall photographs including a landmark. Photographs should have 360 degrees of coverage. Consider using aerial photography, when possible.
- Photograph entrances and exits from the inside and outside.
- Photograph important evidence twice.
 - A medium-distance photograph that shows the evidence and its position to other evidence.
 - A close-up photograph that includes a scale and fills the frame.
- Prior to entering the scene, acquire, if possible, prior photographs, blueprints, or maps of the scene.

Sketch

The sketch establishes a permanent record of items, conditions, and distance and size relationships.

- Sketches supplement photographs.
- Sketch number designations should coordinate with the evidence log number designations.
- Sketches are normally not drawn to scale. However, the sketch should have measurements and details for a drawn-to-scale diagram, if necessary.
- The sketch should include the following:
 - Case identifier.
 - Date, time, and location.
 - Weather and lighting conditions.
 - Identity and assignments of personnel.
 - Dimensions of rooms, furniture, doors, and windows.
 - Distances among objects, persons, bodies, entrances, and exits.
 - Measurements showing the location of evidence. Each object should be located by two measurements from nonmovable items (i.e. doors or walls).
 - Key, legend, compass orientation, scale, scale disclaimer, or a combination of these features.

Crime Scene Search, Record, and Physical Evidence Collection

- Use a search pattern (grid, strip or lane, or spiral).
- Search from the general to the specific for evidence.
- Be alert for all evidence.
- Search entrances and exits.
- Photograph all items before collection and notate the photographic log.
- Mark evidence locations on the sketch.
- Complete the evidence log with notations for each item of evidence. If possible, have one person serve as evidence custodian.
- Two persons should observe evidence in place, during recovery, and being marked for identification. Mark directly on the evidence when necessary, but first attempt to place identifying marks on evidence containers.
- Wear latex or cotton gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints.
- Do not excessively handle the evidence after recovery.
- Seal all evidence packages at the crime scene.
- Obtain known standards (i.e. fiber samples from a known carpet).
- Make a complete evaluation of the crime scene.
- Constantly check paperwork, packaging, and other information for errors.

Final Survey

The final survey is a review of all aspects of the search.

- Discuss the search with all personnel.
- Ensure all documentation is correct and complete.
- Photograph the scene showing the final condition.
- Ensure all evidence is secured.
- Ensure all equipment is retrieved.
- Ensure hiding places or difficult access areas have not been overlooked.

Release

- Release the crime scene after the final survey.
- Crime scene release documentation should include the time and date of release, to whom released, and by whom released.
- Ensure that the evidence is collected according to legal requirements, documented, and marked for identification.
- Consider the need for specialists (i.e. a blood-pattern analyst or a medical examiner) to observe the scene before it is released.
- Once the scene has been released, reentry may require a warrant.
- The scene should be released only when all personnel are satisfied that the scene was searched correctly and completely.
- Only the person in charge should release the scene.