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# CRIME SCENE PHOTOGRAPHY

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**KEYWORDS:** Sequence, photo log, overview, medium range, close-up, point of view, night photographs, latent impressions, wounds.

## OBJECTIVES OF CRIME SCENE PHOTOGRAPHY

The objectives of crime scene photography are to record the **condition** of the scene **before alterations occur**, record the **location and position of evidence items** collected, document the **point of view** of principals and potential witnesses, and document **spatial relationships** of pertinent items. Photography provides visual images of the crime scene and has the distinct advantage of illustrating physical objects in a way that closely approximates the human eye, although photographs lack the depth perception afforded by the eye. Photographs of the scene, particularly when taken in conjunction with videography, capture the visual aspects of the scene that are needed to convey the look of the scene to investigators, attorneys, and jurors, who will not have the opportunity to view the scene firsthand as the crime scene investigator views it.

Photography is **not a substitute for notes or sketches** but rather is an essential **supplement** to these other modes of crime scene documentation. The photographs will be a crucial visual record of the conditions at the scene during the follow-up investigations as well as valuable tools for any reconstruction efforts undertaken. When combined with the notes and sketches of the scene and evidence items, photographs will assist the crime scene investigator in painting an accurate picture of the crime scene during courtroom testimony. The ability to portray accurately the crime scene and the physical evidence therein will go a long way in helping to establish the credibility of the crime scene investigator.

Photography also plays an important role in the efforts to **reconstruct the events of the crime**. In conjunction with sketches, photographs capture the physical aspects of evidence at the crime scene that are amenable to reconstruction by a qualified professional. Photographs of bloodstain patterns are crucial to the reconstruction of those events that produced the patterns

and their sequence. These photographs are taken with scales in view in order to reestablish accurately the sizes of the evidence items. Photographs of bullet trajectories are taken with probes in place (see Chapter Seventeen).

## NUMBER OF PHOTOGRAPHS AT THE SCENE

The number of photographs that need to be taken at any crime scene cannot be established with certainty at the time the scene is being processed, because additional information and questions will arise as the investigation continues. For this reason, it is a better policy to take **too many** photographs rather than too few, since the opportunity to take the photographs is usually limited to the time at hand. The cost of the film and the crime scene investigator's time will be repaid by the savings in the subsequent investigation.

The position of evidence items can never be reproduced exactly after they are moved, hence the photographs must be taken before any disturbance of the scene whenever possible (emergency medical actions, etc., will often disturb the scene, but this situation is unavoidable). Oftentimes, it is helpful to take both videotapes and still photographs of the scene in order more fully to capture the conditions at the scene (see the discussion under Videotaping of Crime Scenes later in this chapter). In some circumstances, the crime scene investigator may need to use instant photography in addition to the still photographs, particularly if the scene is not videotaped (see the sections under Polaroid™ Films at the Scene and Digital Imaging Cameras).

## CONDITIONS AT THE SCENE

The crime scene may be as small as a bathroom or a closet, or it may cover an area of several square miles. More often it is a dwelling, an automobile, or a portion of a lot or a street. The conditions for filming the crime scene may vary considerably. Lighting, weather, and security at the scene present the greatest challenges for the crime scene photographer. If it is possible to wait for better weather and lighting, then do so. If not, then one must use either the available lighting or lighting provided by other means. When taking a photograph of an object at the scene, one should ask the following questions: Why am I taking this photograph? Does the object show or have any relationship to the overall scene? Does the object have any relationship to other items of potential value? Will the photograph represent what I saw? Will the object be distorted or out of perspective with other things at the scene? Will the object be properly exposed? Will reflections off windows, mirrors, or glossy wallpaper wash out my photograph? Will I recognize the photograph after it's developed? Will I be able to explain to the jury what the photograph depicts? Considering these questions will help obtain the best photo documentation of the crime scene.

## CHOICE OF CAMERA TYPE FOR CRIME SCENE PHOTOGRAPHY

The type of camera best suited for crime scene photography is the **single lens reflex (SLR)** camera. The SLR is very compact and comes in a wide variety of formats, from the manually focused unit to the fully automatic unit with automatic focusing, automatic flash set, and automatic winding. Lenses come in a wide assortment and are of sufficient quality for both long-range

and close-up (macro) photographs. Of particular value at the crime scene are the zoom lenses having macro capabilities. A zoom lens in the range 35–70 mm with macro capability coupled with a long-range zoom lens in the range 80–200 mm should be adequate for virtually all crime scene photography. Some specialized photographs (for example, aerial photographs needing a large format negative) may require the use of larger format cameras, but the 35 mm single lens reflex will provide excellent photographs in all but these specialized circumstances. The SLRs with autofocus and exposure will usually provide excellent photographs at a crime scene, but in some circumstances, the camera may be fooled by conditions at the scene. For this reason, the crime scene investigator needs to be familiar with both the camera and those conditions that may affect the quality of the photographs.

## TYPE OF FILM FOR CRIME SCENE PHOTOGRAPHY

**Color print film** is the film of choice for most crime scene photography for many reasons. Color film has replaced black-and-white film for all forensic applications except special needs, such as photographs of latent impressions, infrared photography, and photographs for research or publications. The cost of color film is comparable to that of black-and-white, and is available in many formats and film speeds for the investigator. Color film has an enormous advantage in presenting a “natural” look to the viewer. Moreover, many types of evidence cannot be easily distinguished from the background when black-and-white film is used (bloodstains, for example, look like any other dark stain). In one of the author’s cases, a critical aspect in the investigation of a homicide was the blood spatter present at the scene. The blood-spatter patterns were on mottled black-and-white tile, thereby preventing the reconstruction of the blood-spatter pattern, since the black patterns on the tile could not be distinguished from the bloodstains.

## POLAROID™ FILMS AT THE SCENE

In certain circumstances, the use of Polaroid™ film may be needed for photographs at the crime scene. When it is imperative that the investigator must be sure that the photograph(s) are acceptable, crime scene photographs may be augmented with Polaroid photographs. The use of Positive/Negative Polaroid film is especially helpful in this regard. Some of the circumstances in which Polaroid film is helpful include the photography of impressions in soil prior to casting of the impressions, photography of latent fingerprint impressions prior to lifting attempts in which the surface may not allow for adequate lifting with tape, and the photography of bloodstain patterns prior to collection of blood samples for typing purposes. The Polaroid Corporation has a wide variety of photographic equipment for law enforcement purposes.

## DIGITAL IMAGING CAMERAS

Digital imaging cameras capture a digital image on a computer disk rather than photographic film. In this chapter, the image captured by a digital camera is referred to as a “photograph,” although technically the correct term is “image.” The introduction of digital imaging cameras provided an instrument with the versatility of the SLR camera and the added advantage of the ability