**The Homicide Crime Scene**

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 **(1 )INTRODUCTION**

The homicide crime scene is, without a doubt, the most important crime scene a police officer or investigator will be called upon to respond to. Because of the nature of the crime (death by violence or unnatural causes), the answer to "What has occurred?" can only be determined after a careful and intelligent examination of the crime scene and after the professional and medical evaluation of the various bits and pieces of evidence gathered by the criminal investigator. These bits and pieces may be in the [form](http://www.practicalhomicide.com/Research/HomCrimeSc.htm) of trace evidence found at the scene, statements taken from suspects, direct eyewitness accounts, or autopsy results.

Homicide investigation is a highly professional and specialized undertaking, which requires years of practical experience coupled with a process of continual [education](http://www.practicalhomicide.com/Research/HomCrimeSc.htm) and training. However, homicide investigation is not the exclusive purview of the investigator. Successful homicide investigation often depends on the initial actions taken by patrol officers responding to any given scene. The objective of this article is to address the important initial actions that must be undertaken at the "Homicide Crime Scene."

The three basic principles involved in the initiation of an effective homicide investigation are as follows.

1. Rapid response to the homicide crime scene by patrol officers. This is imperative in order to protect evidentiary materials [before](http://www.practicalhomicide.com/Research/HomCrimeSc.htm) they are destroyed, altered, or lost.

2. Anything and everything should be considered as evidence. Whether this evidence is physical or testimonial, it must be preserved, noted, and brought to the attention of the investigators. The only evidence collected at this point of the investigation is eyewitness accounts or spontaneous statements of a suspect at the scene. After the scene is secured, immediate and appropriate notification must be made to the homicide investigators.

The importance of preserving the homicide crime scene and conducting an intelligent examination at the scene cannot be overemphasized. If a murder case ends in failure or an officer is embarrassed in court, the primary reason may very well be an inadequate examination of the homicide scene or a failure to implement [good](http://www.practicalhomicide.com/Research/HomCrimeSc.htm) basic crime scene procedures as outlined in this text.

**(2) THE HOMICIDE CRIME SCENE**

The investigation of homicide usually starts at the point where the body is originally found. This location is referred to as the ***primary crime scene***. The term ***primary crime scene***characterizes the significance of this location and the immediate concern of responding police officials to this forensically critical area in death investigations.

The term ***primary crime scene*** is sometimes mistakenly used to describe where the original event may have occurred based on the dictionary definition of primary as having occurred first in the development and/or time of an event. For instance, if the person wasn't killed at the location where the body was found the location might be ***erroneously*** referred to as the secondary crime scene. Such an analytical interpretation might very well be appropriate for some speculative concept in the clinical sense. However, a more practical strategy is to focus your investigative resources on the location where the body was found. This is where most of the evidence will be retrieved.

In "Practical Homicide Investigation," we understand that there may be two or more crime scenes in addition to the location where the body is found. These additional crime scenes may include:

    -  Where the body was moved from,

    -  Where the actual assault leading to death took [place](http://www.practicalhomicide.com/Research/HomCrimeSc.htm),

    -  Where any physical or trace evidence connected with the crime is discovered (this may include parts of the body),

    -  A vehicle used to transport the body to and where it is eventually found.

Still other areas related to the primary crime scene include the point of forced entry, the route of escape, the suspect (clothing, hands, and body), and the suspect's residence.

It is important that responding police officers be aware of this multiple?crime scene possibility. Therefore, during the initial receipt of information by the police concerning a possible homicide, the officer should attempt to ascertain the exact location of the situation requiring police investigation and possible additional locations that may need coverage.

**(3) AT THE PRIMARY CRIME SCENE**

Any item can and may constitute physical evidence; therefore, it is imperative that nothing be touched or moved at the scene before the arrival of the investigators. If the need arises that something at the scene be immediately secured or removed before it is destroyed or lost, the officer handling the evidence must document its location, appearance, condition, and any other feature that might affect the investigation. The officer must be sure to inform the homicide detective of the item's original position so that it does not lose its evidentiary value.

The crime scene, especially in homicide cases, is proof that a crime has been committed. It often contains many or all of the elements of the corpus delicti, and provides an abundance of physical evidence that may connect a suspect or suspects to the crime. If you can control the primary crime scene, you can control the investigation.

***Remember, once an item of evidence has been moved or altered it is impossible to restore it to its original position or condition.***

**(4) THE HOMICIDE INVESTIGATION STARTS AT THE PRIMARY CRIME SCENE**

The reason why the homicide investigation starts at the PRIMARY crime scene is twofold:

1.  The police are usually called to this location by the person who discovers the body, a witness to the crime, or, in some instances, the victim.

2.  In homicide cases, the location where the body is discovered yields an abundance of physical evidence and serves as a base of inquiry.

It is important to repeat that **anything and everything** may eventually become evidence. The list of items that may constitute physical and/or testimonial evidence is as extensive as the number, type, and causes of homicide itself. Whether it is the res gestae utterances of the suspect murderer at the scene or an important piece of trace evidence, the fact remains that the **PRIMARY** crime scene is the logical and proper point to start the murder investigation.

**(5) DETERMINING THE DIMENSIONS OF THE HOMICIDE CRIME SCENE**

The cardinal rule in homicide cases is to protect and preserve the crime scene. However, before a crime scene can be protected it must be identified as such. In order for the officer to make an intelligent evaluation of the crime scene, he or she must have an idea of what constitutes physical evidence and where the boundaries of the scene should be established in order to protect the evidence. Some examples of physical evidence, which may be found at the crime scene are listed herein. Although the list does not include all types of evidence, these are the three types most frequently found at the homicide crime scene. The patrol officer, who has the duty of responding to the scene as quickly as possible, begins the investigation by securing the immediate area. Upon confirming that the victim is dead, an assessment is then made by this officer to determine boundaries.



Technically speaking, the homicide crime scene begins at the point where the suspect changed intent into action. It continues through the escape route and includes any location where physical or trace evidence may be located. **However, the primary crime scene is always the location where the body is discovered.** Practically speaking, at this stage of the investigation it is next to impossible to know the exact boundaries of the scene. Even if the body of the victim was "dumped" at this location it is still the primary focus of the initial investigation. The best course of action for the officer is as follows.

1.  Clear the largest area possible. The scene can always be narrowed later.

2.  Make a quick and objective evaluation of the scene based on:

     a.  location of the body,
     b.  presence of any physical evidence,
     c.  eyewitness statements,
     d.  presence of natural boundaries (a room, a house, hallway, an enclosed park, etc.)

3.  Keep in mind the possibility of a multiple series of crime scenes.

If the crime scene is indoors, the job of making this determination and securing the area is relatively easy to accomplish. If the scene is outdoors, the determination will have to be based on the type of location, pedestrian and vehicular traffic, crowds, paths of entry and exit, weather conditions, and many other factors peculiar to that specific location.

In any event, the first officer should not examine the contents of the scene. He should, however, stabilize the scene by isolating the body and immediate area, including any visible evidence, from all other persons.

**(6) PROTECTING THE CRIME SCENE**

The homicide crime scene must be protected from entry by unnecessary or unauthorized persons so that physical evidence will not be altered, moved, destroyed, lost, or contaminated. Other police officers, including supervisory personnel, who do not have a specific or valid reason for being at the crime scene, should be regarded as *unauthorized persons*.

Probably no other aspect of homicide investigation is more open to error than the preservation and protection of the crime scene. The first official acts taken at the scene will either help to bring the investigation to a successful conclusion or will negatively affect both the entire investigation and eventual prosecution of the case.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon the first officer arriving at the scene to perform this first and necessary aspect of the investigation: *Safeguard the location as quickly and as effectively as possible*.

The first police official to arrive at the crime scene is usually the patrol officer, the agency's primary crime?fighting tool, who is expected to respond immediately to any incident where there is a report of a crime or an opportunity to apprehend a criminal. The patrol officer is also the department's representative, responsible for conducting the preliminary investigation, which begins when the officer arrives at the scene.

In homicide cases, the responding officer's duties in the preliminary investigation may simply be to arrive at the scene, observe enough to know that assistance from investigators is required, and protect the scene so that evidence is not destroyed or changed.

Scene protection may be as simple as closing a door to the room where the body is discovered, or as complex as roping off an area of several blocks. There is no definite method or rule for establishing the boundaries of all crime scenes at first glance. As information becomes available at the scene, various other locations may also have to be secured in order to retrieve important physical and trace evidence.

Many times I have been at the scene of a homicide in one location and (as a result of information developed from witnesses or evidence located at the **primary scene**) had to immediately secure a second and third location, a vehicle, and even a building's fire escape and alleyway, used as an escape route by the perpetrator. Obviously, the best places for obtaining physical evidence are nearest to where the critical act occurred, such as in the immediate vicinity of the victim. That is why I stress the significance of the primary crime scene. However, other areas related to this **primary crime scene** should not be overlooked. For example,

    -  The point of forced entry,
    -  The route of escape,
    -  The suspect himself (i.e., clothing, hands, body, etc.),
    -  The location of the weapon or other physical evidence,
    -  A vehicle, which was used in the crime,
    -  The suspect's residence,
    -  The location where the assault leading to death took place,
    -  The location whence the body was moved.

The list of locations that may need protection from contamination are as extensive as the crime is complex.

The police officer or criminal investigator endeavoring to protect and preserve the homicide crime scene will find that he or she faces a number of obstacles. It is impossible to list all the conceivable events that may occur at any given scene.

**(7) THE HOMICIDE CRIME SCENE SIGN-IN SHEET**

The Homicide Crime Scene Sign-In Sheet (see example) has proven to be an effective tactic in securing the preservation of the crime scene. The fundamental objective in this phase of the investigation is to preserve the body and immediate surrounding area or the ***primary crime scene*** exactly as they were when the body was discovered.

***Remember, although the protection of the crime scene is the responsibility of the first officer, all officers responding to and arriving at the scene have an equal responsibility in this duty.*** Realistically speaking, various units and additional personnel respond to homicide crime scenes. The toughest job confronting the first officers is the effective safeguarding of the primary crime scene from these additional police officers, emergency services people, and other officials. Obviously, certain personnel must enter the crime scene in connection with their official duties. The first officers, who are safeguarding the crime scene, should identify and document the presence of these officials by maintaining a Crime Scene Sign-In procedure to assure crime scene integrity and prevent unauthorized personnel from engaging in what I refer to as "crime scene sightseeing." With over 35 years of experience, I have come to realize that, "If anything can go wrong, it will go wrong at the crime scene."

This is especially true at incidents that receive an inordinate amount of media attention. It seems as if every official and his/her brother and/or sister feel the need to "show their presence" at the scene. My solution to this oftentimes-impossible situation is quite simple. I suggest that the officers establish two crime scenes.

1.  The first crime scene or **primary crime scene** is the location where the body was found, or the area where you expect to recover physical evidence. **This is the real crime scene**.

2.  The ***second*** or secure area crime scene is an area set aside from the general public. This allows for all those special dignitaries and high-ranking guests who arrive an opportunity to violate at least one police line in order to establish their importance. It will also serve to keep them within an area where they will be "out?of?the?way" of actual crime?scene operations and preclude any further contamination by official presence. ***This can be called a "'Security zone."***

 **(8)THE PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION AT THE PRIMARY CRIME SCENE**

When the investigator arrives at the primary scene, the first responsibility is to verify the condition of the victim and then assure that the **primary crime scene** is intact. Basically, this action is to reinforce the First Officer's duty to assure crime scene protection. This is usually accomplished during the preliminary "walk-through," as the First officer provides all of the information he or she has ascertained since their arrival and during their crime scene protection phase as discussed earlier. This preliminary "walk-through" is critical since it furnishes the investigator with a "sense" of the event. Prior to the "walk-through" the investigator should stop and observe the area as a whole, noting everything possible before entering the actual crime scene for detailed examination. The purpose of this procedure is to establish an overview of the surrounding area and allow for recall of similar conditions and/or circumstances that the investigator has encountered before. It is during this preliminary phase that the investigator is able to evaluate both the scene and surrounding area to establish;

    -  Consistencies and inconsistencies, which are crucial to the direction of the investigation.
    -  Additional areas, which may require protection.
    -  The presence of any fragile evidence, which may require immediate collection.
    -  "Chain of Custody" of any evidence retrieved during the scene protection phase.

Probably, the most important aspect of the primary crime scene is that of the "*presentation*." The condition, location, and position of the body in relation to the actual crime scene usually provides the experienced homicide detective with crucial information about the event which allows for early investigative hypotheses and assists in validating consistency or confirming inconsistency. ***Was the person killed here? Or, was the body dumped here?***

This is especially important in **equivocal death investigations**, which are open to interpretation. There may be two or more meanings and the case may present as either a homicide or a suicide depending upon the circumstances. The facts are purposefully vague or misleading as in the case of a "**staged crime scene**" or, the death is suspicious or questionable based upon what is presented to the authorities. The deaths may resemble homicides or suicides; accidents or naturals. They are open to interpretation pending further information of the facts, the victimology and the circumstances of the event. In "staged crime scenes," however, the presentation of the homicide victim and the manipulation of the crime scene by a clever offender could make the death appear to be a suicide. I have personally investigated many such cases and the truth of the matter is that initially the cases *did* look like suicides. That is why it is so important to maintain the original crime scene intact.

 **(9)CONCLUSION**

The responding patrol officer and the detective investigator are faced with a crime of the utmost gravity. Homicides entail many possible motives and methods as well as a variety of types of physical evidence. The time-proven principles of Practical Homicide Investigation, which have been presented within this article, illustrate the importance of the proper and professional handling of the **Homicide Crime Scene** by the police authorities.