CRIME SCENE DOCUMENTATION – PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography is the art, application and practice of creating durable images by recording light or other electromagnetic radiation, either electronically by means of an image sensor, or chemically by means of a light-sensitive material such as photographic film. (Wikipedia)

The purpose of still photography of crime scene is to produce a true and accurate record of the crime scene, its related areas and physical evidence. These photographs provide a permanent record for investigators that can be analyzed or examined for later use. These permanent visual records are crucial in the court hearing and trials also. They provide meaningful bits and pieces with an exact measurement of the scene and evidence that can be easily understood by judges and jurors.

Videography is the first step of documentation during crime scene processing. If a video camera is not available, then still photography is the first step immediately following the walk-through of the crime scene. Despite been videotaped, still, photographs are must at every crime scene. This conventional visual documentation is the most important step in the entire investigation process.

Objectives of crime scene photography:

• To record the condition of the scene before alteration occur
• To record the location of the scene.
• To record the position and conditions of the evidence
• To document the point of view of the persons involved and witnesses.
• To document the spatial relationships of pertinent items.
• To convey the look of the scene to investigators, attorneys, and jurors who will not have the opportunity to view the scene first hand.
• To use as a tool for crime scene reconstruction efforts.
• To assist in portraying an accurate picture of the crime scene during courtroom testimony.
• To refresh the photographer’s memory of the scene.
• To be used in direct comparison situations. For example, actual size photographs (one-to-one photos) can be used to compare fingerprint and shoeprints photographed at the crime scene to known fingerprint or shoeprint or shoe from a suspect.

Equipment Needed: Camera (35mm and/or digital single-lens reflex (SLR) of 12megapixels or greater recommended); Film if using a film camera; Battery backups; Memory cards for digital cameras; Detachable flash or additional lighting; Lenses; Flashlight; Tripod; Camera cleaning supplies; Pen; Notebook; Evidence placards and Rulers.

General Considerations

• Avoid disturbance and alteration to the scene by always using a designated safe route when moving through the scene.
• When any alteration is required to the scene, such as placing placards and disassembling equipment, always take photographs before and after alteration.
• Photograph transient objects, such as bloodstains or latent prints, as soon as possible. Move from the exterior to the interior of the crime scene, and from general to specific focus.
• Take photos of overall (long-range), midrange and close-ups.
• Use a tripod, when taking photographs 90 degrees to the subject. Mostly used when taking fingerprint/footprint/shoeprint/tire track photos.
• While taking interior photography take photos using a vertical orientation to get the complete length of a wall.
• Note-taking should occur throughout the photography session. It is important to use a systematic approach to note-taking while taking photographs to maintain a record of your activities and the order and location of pictures as they are taken. Include the time that photographing began and was completed in the notes. The main purpose of note taking during the photography is to remind the investigator what he or she was trying to accomplish with the photo when they see the picture at a later date.
• Never delete a digital photograph taken from the storage media memory, or dispose of used film or negatives when using a film.
• Remove film and upload digital images and store in a designated secure location according to regulation and procedures.

Methods of Crime Scene Photography:

1. First Step: To provide an initial and overall condition of the crime scene. e.g. the location of the scene, physical evidence, the location of victims, the position of weapons, shape and size of wounds, etc.
2. Second Step: To record an aspect of the crime which cannot be preserved in its primary state e.g. skid marks etc. and to facilitate illustration of evidence in the court of law.
3. Third Step: To make visible certain aspects of evidence which cannot normally be seen by the human eye such as latent prints, secret writing, etc.

The systematic and organized method is followed for recording the crime scene and pertinent physical evidence. Photographs are typically taken in regards to the perspective of the camera to the target.

1. Overall
2. Midrange
3. Close-up

Overall Photography:

Overall photographs begins with wide angle, 360-degree perspective of the area surrounding the crime scene from multiple locations and angles. It includes the entire scene from its perimeter and present overlapping photos of the exterior of the buildings, cars, two sides of entry/exits, bystanders and identifying marks, such as house number/address, vehicle licence plates, footwear/tire mark impressions.

For indoor scenes, it is recommended to capture photos from all corner of a room to show its overall arrangement. Use a normal lens (45mm to 55mm) instead of a wide angle lens with a 35mm DSLR camera. Wide angle lens is known to create distortion when taking close up photographs and thus the distance between objects appears to be greater than it actually is.

While taking interior photography take photos using overlapping, vertical orientation to get the complete length (from the top of the ceiling to the floor) of a wall.
Mid-range:

Mid-range photos demonstrate the relationships of an individual piece of evidence to other pieces of evidence or reference points in the scene. The medium range photograph helps to document the condition and features of an object or evidence.

Take mid-range photos of the scene before and after placing the placards and rulers, and after removing the placards and rulers. When appropriate, take close-up photographs immediately after taking the mid-range photographs of the same scene after placard and ruler placements.

Close-Up photos:

Lastly, close-up photos of every key piece of evidence should be taken. The object should first be photographed as it is, then photographed with the ruler.

A scale or ruler should be placed on the same plan as subject and camera lens should be perpendicular to the subject in close up photography, where relative size is important or in one-to-one comparison photographs such as fingerprint/footprint/shoeprint/tire track evidence.

Other Forensic Photography:

To obtain the best possible photographs, special imaging techniques and lighting should be used to photograph fingerprints, indentations, impressions, vehicle identification numbers and very small pieces of evidence.

Alternate light sources (ALS) with blue, green or other coloured filters can help detect processed latent fingerprints or other hidden evidence and illuminate for photographing.

Oblique angle lighting- using a flashlight, camera flash or ALS at a very low angle to cast shadows that allow an imprint or impression to be photographed.

Using Macro lenses one can take very close up images (1:1 or 1:2) of small items. They are helpful to capture images of tool marks or trace evidence.