

Winter 1961

Improved Crime Scene Investigations

Robert L. Collins

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Robert L. Collins, Improved Crime Scene Investigations, 52 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 469 (1961)

This Criminology is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

IMPROVED CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATIONS

ROBERT L. COLLINS

Robert L. Collins is a criminalist with the Southfield Police Department, Southfield, Michigan. After several years of experience as a deputy sheriff in Preston County, West Virginia, Mr. Collins enrolled at Michigan State University where he received a Bachelor of Science Degree in Criminalistics in 1959.—EDITOR.

The detection of the criminal has been improved in recent years with the development of the scientific laboratory, polygraph, and better communications. However, reports for 1959 indicate in crimes against the person and property that for one hundred crimes only fourteen defendants were found guilty.¹

With the available methods of detection and only minor improvements foreseeable in the future, the police department is confronted with a continuous increase in crimes against the person and property.² In addition, the current trend of the courts with respect to search and seizure and interrogation has made things more difficult for the investigator.³ Also, the methods of the criminal have become more skillful and less detectable; for instance, the present practice of the criminal leaving his tools and wearing apparel at the scene in burglary cases, thus eliminating later comparisons. These factors combine to indicate that improved investigation techniques are needed if the police department is to continue the present rate of fourteen convictions for every one hundred crimes committed.

The detection and apprehension of the criminal is usually accomplished by the determination, intelligence, and skills of the investigator. Once the suspect is apprehended, the investigator is confronted with proving his guilt or innocence. The police laboratory, through the scientific examination of physical evidence, may be of assistance to the investigator in determining the manner in which a crime was committed, to connect a suspect with the crime, or to aid in establishing the identity of the criminal.

In communities served only by a state labora-

¹ Issued by John Edgar Hoover, *UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS—1959*, p. 12.

² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³ For a discussion of the problem see OLIVER GASCH, *Effect of Mallory Decision, THE POLICE CHIEF*, 27:34, November 1960 and STEPHEN P. KENNEDY, *Prosecutors and Police—Their Common Bond*, *J. CRIM. L., C. & P. S.*, 49:367 (1958).

tory or the crime laboratory of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the burden of recognition, collection, and preservation of evidence is placed on the investigator. Too often the use of these laboratories is restricted to the more serious types of crimes, and even then, the pertinence of the laboratory examination depends upon the proper handling of the evidence at the scene.

Many factors combine to restrict laboratories serving large areas from sending personnel to a crime scene except on the most serious crimes, and then the possibility of delay would certainly affect the pertinence of some evidence. Therefore, as the crime scene becomes increasingly important to the investigator, improvements at the scene are needed.

The procedure now followed by the Southfield Police Department is believed by the author to be one solution to the problem of crime scene investigations. It is departmental procedure that a field criminalist visit all crime scenes designated by the chief of police or any other scene so requested by an officer; however, he is directly responsible only to the chief of police. It is the field criminalist's responsibility to conduct crime scene investigations and to report to the investigating officer the evidence found, its potential evidential value, and what may be expected from a laboratory examination. It is further the duty of the field criminalist to see that the evidence collected is sent to a crime laboratory for examination and that the results are given to the investigating officer.

The criminalist at no time conducts analyses of evidence that would conflict with the regulations of other laboratories relating to their acceptance of evidence for examination. Any analysis or examination by the criminalist is to ascertain its evidential value and not to confirm the laboratory's analysis or examination.

The field criminalist must have the scientific background which qualifies him to serve in many

areas of police science. He should have experience in investigation, and the necessary knowledge and educational skills to work in a general police laboratory; for without this knowledge and experience, he would not be effective at the crime scene.

The police scientist in the field is not expected to qualify as an expert in numerous areas of the forensic sciences; although he may serve as an expert in one or more categories. To serve to his fullest capacity, he must have enough knowledge of all areas to call upon the services of experts when the evidence indicates.

The laboratory of the Southfield Police Department contains the necessary equipment to handle adequately any photographic problem that may arise. In addition, casting material, fingerprint equipment, containers, and other apparatus necessary for the collection and proper handling of evidence is a part of the equipment.⁴ Also found in the laboratory are chemicals, microscopes and other equipment necessary to conduct preliminary examinations and inspection of evidence.⁵ In instances in which a preliminary test is in itself confirmatory, such examinations are made without the assistance of another laboratory. However, the author has found that the great bulk of evidence is actually sent to another laboratory for analysis. Thus, the department does not have to invest large

⁴ For a discussion of needed equipment and material see O'HARA & OSTERBURG, *AN INTRODUCTION TO CRIMINALISTICS*, The MacMillan Company, (1949) pp. 22-23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

sums of money in equipment, and the field criminalist does not fall into the dangerous position of being expected to make analyses for which he has not had sufficient experience, or does not have the necessary equipment available. In addition, he is not expected to conduct daily routine analyses which might eventually become his primary role and the scene investigations a secondary one.

It is believed that the procedure outlined is one way to improve the method of investigation. It points out that a problem exists in the recognition, collection, and preservation of evidence and offers one solution for the problem. It further recognizes that any such program must be rigidly outlined and controlled by the commanding officer. Otherwise, jealousy and the overlapping of duties will be an unfortunate result.

Under the suggested procedure, crime scenes are visited by trained personnel familiar with the scientific processes of the laboratory and the needs of the investigator. The field criminalist, through his interest and training, will keep abreast of new processes and methods in the field which may be applied to the crime scene investigation.

The investigator is relieved of the time consuming and often unskilled practice of crime scene search. He has more time for actual investigation for which he is trained. In addition, the investigator is quickly supplied with information as to evidence found at the scene and its value.

In brief, the scientist and the investigator work as a team, each trained for his particular job, for improved law enforcement.