

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

**Staged Crime Scenes:
Has Society Created A Problem For Law Enforcement?**

**An Administrative Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

**By
Philip R. Adams**

**Watauga Department of Public Safety
Watauga, Texas
July 2005**

ABSTRACT

The term “staged crime scenes” refers to a scene that has been altered. The offender who usually had some type of relationship with the victim does this. The second reasoning for staging is to protect the victim of the victim’s family. This type of staging usually occurs in the case of rape-murder crimes or autoerotic fatalities. If a crime scene can be so easily staged to look like one thing happened when something totally different happened, one must consider how valid the role of crime scene analysis and criminal profiling is in the development of trial strategy. The research will show that there is a problem in the way some crime scenes are investigated. Through independent research the author will demonstrate that there is a large portion of law enforcement officers who know neither the aforementioned term nor what to look for at a staged crime scene. All experts who were examined demonstrate that “staged crime scenes” have become a phenomenon and law enforcement will need to learn how to deal with the issue. After the research is completed, there will be sufficient evidence regarding the need for officers to learn more about “staged crime scenes” and the way in which these crime scenes are investigated.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction.....	1
Review of Literature	2
Methodology6
Findings	7
Discussions/Conclusions	10
References	13

INTRODUCTION

Crime scene staging is fairly new to the law enforcement community. However, the research reviewed demonstrates that staged crime scenes date back to the early biblical times. A staged crime scene causes problems for the officers' involved, creating confusion and unanswered questions. The offender involved in the staging attempts to mislead the officers at a scene. The staged crime scene is important to the law enforcement community for the effective prosecution of a suspect or to prove that other circumstances were involved that caused the scene to change.

The researcher will attempt to illustrate that a staged crime scene is sometimes overlooked by the officer called to a scene. It is important to consider whether or not the police officer who is the first responder to a crime scene (homicide or property crime) has the experience and knowledge to determine if the crime scene has been staged. The staged crime scene will challenge an officer's intelligence, emotions and experience.

There will be a survey drafted and mailed to members of the Homicide Investigators of Texas organization (an organization throughout the State of Texas and New Mexico), which mainly focuses on homicide investigations. With the experience of these individuals, the author hopes to confirm that the street officer does not have a working knowledge of what to look for in a staged crime scene. Through the survey and research provided, the author will also explain that more education needs to be conducted, with street officers as well as new investigators, regarding the proper observation of a crime scene and the disclosure of what to look for in a crime scene.

The author anticipates that the provided research will encourage law enforcement officers to receive special training in crime scene search and investigative strategies. Armed with this

knowledge, an officer arriving at a reported crime scene should be able to determine if he is in fact looking at a staged crime scene or a scene that has not been disturbed.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For the purpose of this research paper, according to Vernon Geberth “staging” is defined as the “purposeful alteration of a crime scene, or an attempt to redirect the investigation away from the person who staged the scene” (p. 117). As aforementioned in the introduction, the “staged crime scene” dates back to early biblical times (Genesis 37:1-35) with the earliest account dealing with a young man named Joseph who was the son of Jacob. Joseph’s brothers were jealous of him so they sold him into slavery, then slaughtered a goat and dipped Joseph’s robe into the blood. They then convinced Jacob that Joseph had been killed by wild animals. Similarly, death investigations are inquiries that are open to interpretation with two or more possible explanations to a death, homicide or suicide scene. The death scenes could appear as homicides or suicides, but after further investigation there might be information that leads to the evidence of a staged death scene. With this finding, it shows that the offender is trying to mislead the investigation. In the case of a suicide, there are usually verbal threats of self destruction and other indications of despondency. In some cases, these threats are made to the people who the deceased knows or respects. In other instances, the deceased will have had a change in behavior such as increasing life insurance premiums, giving away prized possessions or he or she may have began to speak of life in past tense. These indications to people who know the deceased will help support the investigator with a base of inquiry, which could support a hypothesis of possible suicide. Many details are also gathered that could support facts that the incident was in fact not a suicide, but a homicide covered up to look as if the deceased

committed suicide. With interviews that investigating officers arriving at a scene would be conducting, it would show that the deceased had made short and long range goals, this is not typical for someone who is contemplating suicide. According to Geberth (1996), the most common type of “staging” occurs when the perpetrator changes elements of the scene to make the death appear to be a suicide to cover up a murder, the second most common type of staging is when the perpetrator attempts to redirect the investigation by making the crime appear to be a sex related homicide. The crime of arson represents another type of staging. The perpetrator purposely torches a crime scene to destroy evidence or make a death appear to be from an accidental fire. In a study of twenty active and retired law enforcement officers with extensive experience in violent crime investigation, conducted by Hazelwood & Napier (2004), the authors explain that the majority of the officers surveyed, reported that nonfatal false allegations of sexual assault were the most common form of staging, followed by staging homicides as burglary or robbery related crimes. The false allegations of sexual assault are the most politically sensitive staged crime scene. When discussing how to apply these investigative red flags, Douglas & Munn (1992) state that “an offender who stages a crime scene usually makes mistakes because he stages it to look the way he thinks a crime scene should look, inconsistencies will begin appearing at the crime scene, with forensics, and with the overall picture of the offense” (p. 253). In so doing, offenders experience a great deal of stress and do not have the time to fit all the pieces together logically. As a result, inconsistencies in forensic findings and in the overall “big picture” of the crime scene will begin to appear. These contradictions will often serve as the “red flags” of staging and prevent misguidance of the investigation. To ensure this doesn’t happen, investigators should scrutinize all crime scene indicators individually, then view them in context with the total picture. Crime scene indicators

include all evidence of offender activity, such as method of entry, offender-victim interaction, and body disposition. When exploring these issues, investigators should consider several factors. For example, if burglary appears to be the motive, investigators should establish whether or not the offender took inappropriate items from the crime scene. In one case submitted to the National Center for Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC), a man returning home from work interrupted a burglary in progress. The startled resident was killed by the burglar as he attempted to flee. An inventory of the crime scene determined that the offenders did not steal anything, although it did appear that they started to disassemble a large stereo and TV unit. Further examination of the crime scene revealed that they left smaller, and easily transported, items of far greater value (i.e. jewelry and a coin collection). The police subsequently determined that the victim's wife paid the burglars to stage the crime and kill her husband. She, in fact, was having an affair with one of the suspects. Another factor for investigators to consider is whether or not the point of entry makes sense. For example, did the offender enter the house through a second-story window, even though there was an easier, less conspicuous entrance that could have been used and if so, why did the offender increase his chance of being seen by potential witnesses who might alert authorities? Investigators should also consider whether the offender put himself at high risk by committing the crime during the daylight hours, in a populated area. If the crime scene is a place of residence, they should also evaluate any obvious signs of occupancy, such as lights on in the house, vehicles in the driveway, etc. Forensic results that don't fit the crime should also cause investigators to consider staging. Personal assaults should raise suspicion, especially if material gain appears to be the initial motive. These assaults could include the use of a weapon of opportunity, manual or ligature strangulation, facial beating (depersonalization), and excessive trauma beyond that necessary to cause death (overkill). In other words, do the

injuries fit the crime? Sexual and domestic homicides usually demonstrate forensic findings of a close-range, personal assault. The victim, not money or property, is the primary focus of the offender. However, this type of offender will often attempt to stage a sexual or domestic homicide that appears to be motivated by personal gain. This does not imply that personal assaults never happen while a property crime is being committed, but usually these offenders prefer quick, clean kills that reduce the time spent at the scene. Red flags are also raised when there are discrepancies between witness/survivor accounts and forensic results. Often, investigators will find forensic discrepancies when an offender stages a rape/murder, that is, positioning the body to infer sexual assault. If the offender has a close relationship with the victim he/she will only partially remove the victim's clothing, never leaving him/her completely nude. In early writings, Austrian Jurist Dr. Hans Gross (1924) stated, "So long as one only looks on the scene, it is impossible, whatever the care, time, and attention bestowed, to detect all the details, and especially note the incongruities: but these strike us at once when we set ourselves to describe the picture on paper as exactly and clearly as possible" (p. 439).

The "defects of the situation" are just those contradictions, which occur when one desires to represent the situation as something quite different from what it really is, and this with the very best intentions and the purest belief that one has worked with all of the forethought, craft, and consideration imaginable. Of all of the authors reviewed concerning the topic of staged crime scenes, there is one opinion that stands out. Most agree that an investigator needs to look at all areas of the crime scene, look at the victimology, interview the deceased family friends and look for other answers that might not be present with the first viewing of the crime scene. The most important question to be answered in a staged crime scene should focus on who is responsible for the crime. Douglas and Munn (1992) state that "when a crime scene is staged,

the responsible person is not someone who just happens upon the victim. It is almost always someone who had some kind of association or relationship with the victim” (p 252). Research has also shown that the staging offender is most often a white female.

Research by Hazelwood & Napier (2004), demonstrates that twenty experienced violent crime investigators show that the age range of the staging offender is between 21 and 30 (65%), 31 and 45 (25%) and 15 to 20 (10%). The research also shows that most of the staging was done by Caucasians and that most believed that it was always a male. In another area, 85% of the twenty officers surveyed reported that the offender was or had been an intimate partner of the victim. Ten percent of the officers advised that the offender was an acquaintance and only 5% reported the offender as someone other than an acquaintance. The surveyed officers reported that in staged, nonfatal sexual crimes, the most common offender was a white female between 21 and 30 years old. In staged crime scenes involving fatalities, the staging offender was most commonly a white male, who was an intimate partner of the victim and between 26 and 35 years old.

METHODOLOGY

The author’s goal in conducting this research is to produce an answer to the research question which considers whether or not society has created a problem for law enforcement. The author’s purpose is to establish the value of, and need for additional training for law enforcement officers. The author hypothesizes that this research will confirm that both officers and law enforcement agencies benefit when training in specified areas is offered to the officers. Additionally the author contends that this study will also affirm that as a result of additional training there will be a smaller chance for a crime scene being deemed an accident or suicide.

Having established these results through research, the author ultimately hopes that more training divisions within police agencies will look more closely at this type of training.

FINDINGS

Additionally, data has been collected from twenty one Texas law enforcement agencies. This has been accomplished through the administration of a survey utilizing categorical and close-ended, forced response questions. Survey participation was requested of officers from agencies of varying size and geographic location within the state of Texas, and resulted in 100% response rate. Analysis of this data produced statistics regarding the percentage of agencies that recognize a staged crime scene and a confirmation that most officers have knowledge of this phenomenon. All officers were asked if they know what a staged crime scene is with 100% reporting that they do have an understanding of what a staged crime scene is. There were no officers surveyed who knew if they had in fact investigated a staged crime scene. Only a small percent of the actual staged crime scenes that the surveyed officers spoke about were thefts or burglaries.

When investigators approach a crime scene, they should look for behavioral “clues” left by the offender. This is when investigators attempt to find answers to several critical questions which include: how the encounter between the offender and victim occurred, whether or not the offender blitzed or ambushed the victim, or did he/she use verbal means (the con) to capture him/her, whether or not the offender used ligatures to control the victim, what the sequence of events were, whether or not the victim was sexually assaulted before or after death, when did any possible mutilation take place—before or after death, and whether or not the offender placed any item at the crime scene or removed something from the crime scene. As investigators analyze

crime scenes, facts may arise that baffle them. These details may contain peculiarities that serve no apparent purpose in the perpetration of the crime and obscure the underlying motive of the crime. This confusion may be the result of crime scene behavior referred to as staging. The death investigator needs to be aware of the possibility that a crime scene may in fact be staged in an attempt to mislead the authorities and/or redirect the investigation. It is very important that investigators follow a set of investigative strategies. The offender in a staged crime scene is challenging the investigators intelligence. Some of the offenders see themselves as superior to the authorities and to law enforcement in particular. Determining a motive for a staged scene is a key issue in resolving the criminal investigation. More often than not, learning the motive will help lead to the person responsible. In determining the motive there will be two different behaviors: the original act that necessitated the staging (i.e., homicide or the false allegation of rape) and autoerotic death and the staging itself. There are several motives that are listed in the research: (a) greed-defined as an intense desire for money or property, (b) anger-revenge-defined as strong feelings of hostility accompanied by a desire for retribution, (c) attention-defined as associated with false allegations of sexual assault, (d) game playing-defined as least common motive and is only observed in suicides and homicides, (e) self-preservation-defined as redirecting the investigation away from the most logical suspect, (f) embarrassment-shame-defined as the offender is attempting to provide the victim with a degree of dignity. The investigator must be open to all possibilities when confronted with a staged scene. The trained and experienced observer will agree that the crime scene always has a story to tell to a patient and meticulous person. Photographs, videotapes, sketches, and police reports will remain unchanged and will over time present a logical fact finding progression through a staged crime scene. The investigator has two sources of critical information available: (a) the victim and (b)

the scene. With the help of the sources available, the investigator will be able to determine if the factors indicate a staged crime scene. Most of the research points to the victimology as being the key to both fatal and nonfatal staged crime scenes. A victimology survey should determine his or her lifestyle, sexual habits, occupation, physical condition, security concerns, attitude, reputation, drug and alcohol use, personal associations, and geographic profile. There are three specific areas that an investigator can look for, which consider any inconsistencies that may be found. They are identified as: victim centered, immediate location, and distant locations. The term "victim-centered" refers to elements that directly impact the victim, sexual assault, and any clothing in disarray. Immediate location refers to everything that is around the scene, items destroyed, forced entry, or noting observations like whether or not the TV is on or off. The distant location refers to other geographic locations in relation to the crime, such as where the body was disposed or where a vehicle was disposed. Since there are no known statistics kept on the incident of staged crime scenes, all agree that less than 3% of violent crimes against persons are actually staged. Staged crime scenes are limited only by the imagination of the person committing the crime. Geberth (1996) stated that the term "staging" should not be used to describe the actions of surviving family members who cover or redress a loved one who is found nude or has died in an embarrassing situation. Additionally, Geberth qualified his words with the fact that this is understandable considering the shock that the relatives have experienced. There are several helpful investigative steps that can be taken when approaching a possible staged crime scene and it is highly important to conduct a comprehensive and thorough review of the documented scene, giving little thought to the time involved.

By the study and an account of the victim through victimology, the investigator is able to identify and document all indicators of staging and initially identify and document possible

motives for the original act and for the staging of the crime. The investigator can then determine who would have benefited from the original act and the staging of the crime scene. It is also important to keep in mind that the responsible person may be the victim, even in death related cases. One should also be aware that some people try to prevent the future shock that may be brought about by the position, dress, or condition of the victim. In addition, they will often stage an autoerotic fatality to look like a suicide, perhaps even writing a suicide note. The person may even go so far as to make a crime scene appear to be a homicide. Investigators need to obtain an accurate description of the body's condition when found and to determine exactly what the person who found the body did to alter the crime scene. Scrutiny of forensic findings, crime scene dynamics, and victimology will probably reveal the true circumstances surrounding the deaths. Finally, at some crime scenes, investigators must discern if the scene is truly disorganized or if the offender staged it to appear careless and haphazard. This determination not only helps to direct the analysis to the underlying motive but also helps to shape the offender profile. However, recognition of staging, especially with a shrewd offender, can be difficult. Investigators must examine all factors of the crime if they suspect it has been staged. This is when forensics, victimology, and minute crime scene details become critical to determine if staging occurred. As the general public watches more crime shows and understands the way crimes are committed it is possible that more staged crime scenes will increase.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The author has demonstrated the fact that there are staged crime scenes in police investigation. The facts and the findings of this research demonstrated that these cases could be overlooked during the investigation of a crime scene. One thing that was considered was

whether or not a police officer who is the first responder to a crime scene (homicide or property crime) has the experience and knowledge to determine if in fact a crime scene has been staged. The researcher believes that the research has shown that the law enforcement officer does not have the training required to recognize this phenomena when observed. The survey questions will reveal that most officers know about staged scenes, but have never been involved in a scene that was staged. The findings of the research and the subsequent conclusions support the fact that this is a field in law enforcement that is a new area for officers to be trained in and made aware of. The research has been limited because the topic has not been discussed or studied a great deal. With the realization that this incident can occur, there will be more training on this topic. As the television and true crime stories expand on the types of forensic testing that is available to law enforcement, the likelihood of this occurring will continue to be more prevalent. This research will be made available to new law enforcement officers as well as the seasoned veterans who are just learning about this new area of crime scene scenarios. The crime scene investigator will look a little differently at the way a scene is processed. This will help determine the true facts of a case in addition to what is being said about a particular case or crime scene. If investigators suspect a crime has been staged, they should look for signs of association between the offender and the victim. Or, as is frequently the case with domestic violence, the involvement of a third party, who is usually the one who discovers the victim. Violent crime scenes require investigators to be diagnosticians. They must be able to analyze crime scenes for the messages they emit and understand the dynamics of human behavior displayed at crime scenes. Investigators must also be able to recognize the different manifestations of behavior, so they can ask the right questions to get valid answers. By approaching each crime scene with an awareness of these factors, investigators can steadily improve their ability to read the true story

of each violent crime scene. By doing so, investigators will be more knowledgeable and better equipped to apprehend the violent crime offender.

REFERENCES

Geberth, V. (1996, February). The staged crime scene. *Law and Order Magazine*, 44(2-3), 1-7.

Geberth, V. (2004, November). An equivocal death and staged crime scene. *Law and Order Magazine*, 52, 117-118.

Hazelwood, R. R. & Napier, M. R. (2004). Crime scene staging and its detection. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 48 (6), 744-759.

Keppel, R. D. & Weis, J. G. (2004, November). The rarity of unusual dispositions of victim bodies: staging and posing. *Journal of Forensic Science*, 49(6), 1-5.

Turvey, B. S. (2000, December). Staged crime scenes: a preliminary study of 25 cases. *Journal of Behavioral Profiling*, 1(3), 1-8.

Geberth, V. (2003, November). The Homicide Crime Scene. *Practical Homicide Investigation*, Law and Order, Vol. 51, No. 11, November, 2003

Jones, S. (Spring 2000). The Process of Criminal Profiling when Applied to a Serial Killer

Douglas, J. (February 1992). *Violent Crime Scene Analysis: Modus Operandi, Signature, and Staging*