



# CRIME SCENE MANAGEMENT WHEN THE SAPS TAKE CONTROL

By Kotie Geldenhuys in cooperation with Lt-Col (ret) Frans van der Merwe

**Upon the arrival of the SAPS at a crime scene, the first responder, whether a neighbourhood watch member, private security officer or civilian, will hand over the scene with all pertinent information about the scene to the first police member who arrives on the scene. This is typically a VISPOL (uniformed) member from a local police station.**

**G**iven that each crime scene must be handled based on its unique characteristics, only general guidelines for approaching crime scenes can be outlined. The SAPS Detective Learning Programme (SAPS, 2009) outlines the procedures to be followed upon receiving a crime report:

- In the **event phase**, the public is typically engaged and in the optimal position to stabilise the situation and manage the crime scene.
- The **reporting phase** is when a member of the public notifies the SAPS 10111 call centre about an incident. The call-taker is responsible for accurately gathering all necessary information in detail and to transmit this information to the dispatcher.
- During the **activation phase** the dispatcher mobilises role-players to the crime scene as needed.
- The **responding phase** occurs when the first member arrives at the scene. Lt-Col (ret) Frans van der Merwe stressed that during this phase, the first member should approach the scene with careful consideration for personal safety, the safety of others and the preservation of the crime scene. Upon reaching the scene, the first member is required to notify the dispatcher of their arrival and proceed to assess the situation, conducting thorough

observations. It is possible that the perpetrator could still be present at the crime scene upon the arrival of the first member. In such cases, any individuals deemed as suspects should be handed over to the backup team to ensure their removal from the crime scene and prevent any potential contamination. The investigating officer must ensure that any potential evidence is obtained from the suspect, as soon as possible. This includes their clothing and footwear (Lochner and Zinn, 2015). If a shooting took place, it is imperative to examine the suspect's hands for gunshot residue.

- During the **controlling phase** the first member should prioritise caring for the injured, assume responsibility for the initial scene handover from the public, identify and establish a command centre, and function as the command centre commander until an official commander is designated. **The first member, regardless of rank or position, is tasked with assuming control and ensuring that no unauthorised individuals, including higher-ranking police officers unrelated to the incident, gain access to the crime scene.** Instances have occurred where various police officials, including senior officers, and members of the media were permitted onto the crime scene, leading to potential contamination through mishandling of evidence, traversing the area and even removing of physical proof. **The primary responsibility of the first responding police member is to safeguard the crime scene until the arrival of crime scene examiners from the Criminal Record Centre and the investigating officer.** Lt-Col (ret) Van der Merwe added that the first member must identify the nature of the incident and give a situation report to the dispatcher.
- During the **securing and safeguarding phase**, the first member must identify the nature of the incident and give a situation report to the dispatcher. It is also during this phase that a

perimeter will be established around the incident site and access control measures to safeguard the area will be implemented (see more below). Upon arrival, control of the scene is transferred to the crime scene manager.

## Protection of the crime scene

The first member must establish both an inner and outer cordon as it is crucial in crime scene management. The "inner cordon" defines the boundary directly surrounding the crime scene, serving as the closest safety perimeter. The "outer cordon" is the boundary around the inner cordon designated for police activities, aimed at ensuring the safety of personnel and preserving the crime scene.

The first member must prevent contamination and exposure to the elements for evidence-related items. He or she must identify additional scenes potentially linked to the primary one and safeguard them, such as a getaway vehicle. It is also important to secure access and departure routes used by known suspects. The first member must implement access control measures, including maintaining an access log.

In the absence of a crime scene manager, the first member at the scene is responsible for creating an emergency access route. This route is crucial to prevent the contamination of evidence and should be accessible for emergency vehicles such as ambulances, forensic scientists and crime scene investigators. It must be clearly marked and strategically positioned to minimise any disruption to the evidence. With due consideration of the integrity of physical evidence the first member must mark the place where the injured was found. The first member must request witnesses to wait in a specified area for investigating officers, urging them not to discuss the incident among themselves. If possible, collect information about suspects, including descriptions and escape directions.

Upon arrival, the first member must transfer the control of the scene to the crime scene manager or investigating officer, providing a comprehensive briefing and supplying important details, such as:

- Information about the person reporting the crime
- Time when the incident was reported
- Time of the incident
- Actions taken by the first member/first responder which include responding to actions required by the dispatcher as well as instructions given to others by the first member
- Given or received instructions which include dispatch of the first member by 10111 or relevant authority, the information the first member received from the dispatcher about the crime, possible suspects on the crime scene who must be detained and patients who need medical attention. The first member has the authority to enlist assistance from individuals on the scene, such as civilians or private security guards, for tasks such as securing gates or doors to prevent suspects' escape or maintaining a safe distance for curious bystanders. The first member also provides a briefing to the crime scene manager or investigating officer, outlining the completed actions and any outstanding tasks or instructions that still need to be taken.

---

**The first member, regardless of rank or position, is tasked with assuming control and ensuring that no unauthorised individuals, including higher-ranking police officers unrelated to the incident, gain access to the crime scene.**

---



- 
- Document particulars of injured individuals and emergency personnel.

Lt-Col (ret) Van der Merwe made it clear that self-confidence and initiative in handling crime scenes are important and can only be obtained through knowledge about how to take control, secure and protect a crime scene.

## The crime scene manager

With smaller crime scenes, such as housebreaking or theft from a vehicle, the first police responder can assume the role of the crime scene manager. Conversely, in larger and more serious crime scenes, the first responder must maintain control until an official crime scene manager, typically the duty officer from detective services or an investigative unit, arrives. At serious violent crime scenes, such as cash-in-transit heists involving multiple investigating officers and specialised units, a designated member must proactively take charge of managing the crime scene. This individual then officially becomes the crime scene manager with the responsibility of ensuring proper cordoning off of the scene and dispatching necessary experts. The determination of who assumes the role of the crime scene manager may also hinge on the nature of the crime scene. In high-profile cases, senior police officers such as colonels or brigadiers often take on the responsibility of the crime scene manager.

According to the SAPS Detective Learning Programme (SAPS, 2009), the following steps are taken after the first member has handed over the crime scene to the crime scene manager:

- During the **first walk-through**, the crime scene manager, in the company of the investigating officer and the crime scene examiner (also known as a crime scene technician), will undertake a thorough examination to ascertain specific crucial aspects of the scene. This walk-through phase allows the investigating officer to determine the nature and scope of the crime (Lochner and Zinn, 2015). During this walkthrough, the investigative officer plays a crucial role in guiding the process by identifying significant physical evidence for the crime scene examiner. This physical evidence may encompass items such as cigarette butts, fingerprints on glass, parking tickets, tracks, clothing, blood, documents, cell-phones and weapons. During this phase the best course of action for the investigation is determined.
- During the **planning phase**, the crime scene manager and the crime scene processing team formulate and agree upon the strategy and methodology to be employed in the crime scene investigation. Additional resources required at the crime scene will be determined. As an example, in the case of a suspected arson incident, fire and arson investigators from the Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) will be summoned to the crime scene. Forensic entomologists' expertise becomes crucial when active insect activity is observed, and if there is suspicion of a psychologically-motivated crime, a member of the Investigative Psychology Section (IPS) will be requested for support. It is important to meticulously record the identity and roles of all individuals entering the scene, with comprehensive documentation in the log (Geldenhuis, 2021). Lt-Col (ret) Van der Merwe emphasised the significance of using investigating support optimally.
- The next phase is the **investigation phase** where the principal investigator is tasked with maintaining the case docket, while coordinating the efforts of the investigating team. The thoroughness and meticulousness with which a crime scene is investigated are crucial factors determining the success of an investigation. Crime scene investigation involves a meticulous and painstaking process. Lt-Col (ret) Van der Merwe argued that it is of utmost importance to record facts and events properly and ensure that the crime scene remains under police protection as long as necessary.
  - ❖ During the **processing phase** the crime scene manager assesses the situation to determine the composition of the crime scene processing team.
  - ❖ The purpose of the **final walk-through** is to scrutinise the activities of the investigation and processing teams, ensuring the accurate execution of the original plan.
  - ❖ This is followed by a **debriefing phase** where the crime scene commander hosts a debriefing session involving all key role-players.
  - ❖ During the **restoring phase** the crime scene manager collaborates with the investigating officer to ensure the proper restoration of the crime scene by removing any items or equipment used during the crime scene attendance and processing
  - ❖ The **releasing phase** is when the crime scene manager identifies the relevant party to whom the crime scene must be handed over.

## Crime scene management process

While some individuals may argue that there are no rigid guidelines for the protocols to be observed at a crime scene, the actions of a police official are shaped by their judgment and initiative. The SAPS have also established explicit regulations governing the procedures at a crime scene, and all SAPS members are required to adhere to these. The SAPS National Instruction 1 of 2015 states that crime scene management involves the process of planning and implementation of measures to:

- "(i) take control and secure the crime scene;
- (ii) ensure the integrity and the originality of evidence and exhibits;
- (iii) investigate and process the crime scene thoroughly and undisturbed;
- (iv) coordinate and maximise the collection of exhibits;
- (v) utilise the investigation support resources optimally;
- (vi) record facts and events properly; and
- (vii) ensure that the crime scene remains under police protection for the period determined by the crime scene manager."

Emphasising the fundamental principles of crime scene management is crucial. These principles accentuate the importance of refraining from touching, altering, removing or adding anything until the evidence has been thoroughly documented, identified, measured and photographed. **The objective of proper crime scene management is to guarantee that the integrity of the evidence remains beyond dispute and to prevent contamination.** It is essential to recognise that once an item or object has been relocated, it can never be restored to its original position (Lochner and Zinn, 2015). It is also crucial for crime scene examiners to wear protective clothing. Supervisors overseeing the crime scene must enforce strict adherence to wearing the necessary protective clothing, ensuring that no one enters without it. This precaution is essential to prevent the introduction of trace matter from external sources or the transfer of trace matter from individuals to the crime scene.

Lt-Col (ret) Van der Merwe concludes that successful convictions rely mostly on crime scene management. The management of all crime scenes must be done within the scope of the legal framework. Maintaining exhibit integrity and chain of custody plays an important role towards successful convictions.

## In the April 2024 issue:

Next month we will look at crime scene photography.

## Editor's note

The list of references is published on p78.

	<p>For more information about WESCO:</p>
	<p><a href="http://www.wescoforensics.co.za">www.wescoforensics.co.za</a> E-mail: <a href="mailto:info@wescoforensics.co.za">info@wescoforensics.co.za</a></p>
	<p>Management services: Tionette van der Westhuizen Cell: 072 598 3493</p>
	<p>Public relations: Lettie Stander Cell: 082 857 1548</p>