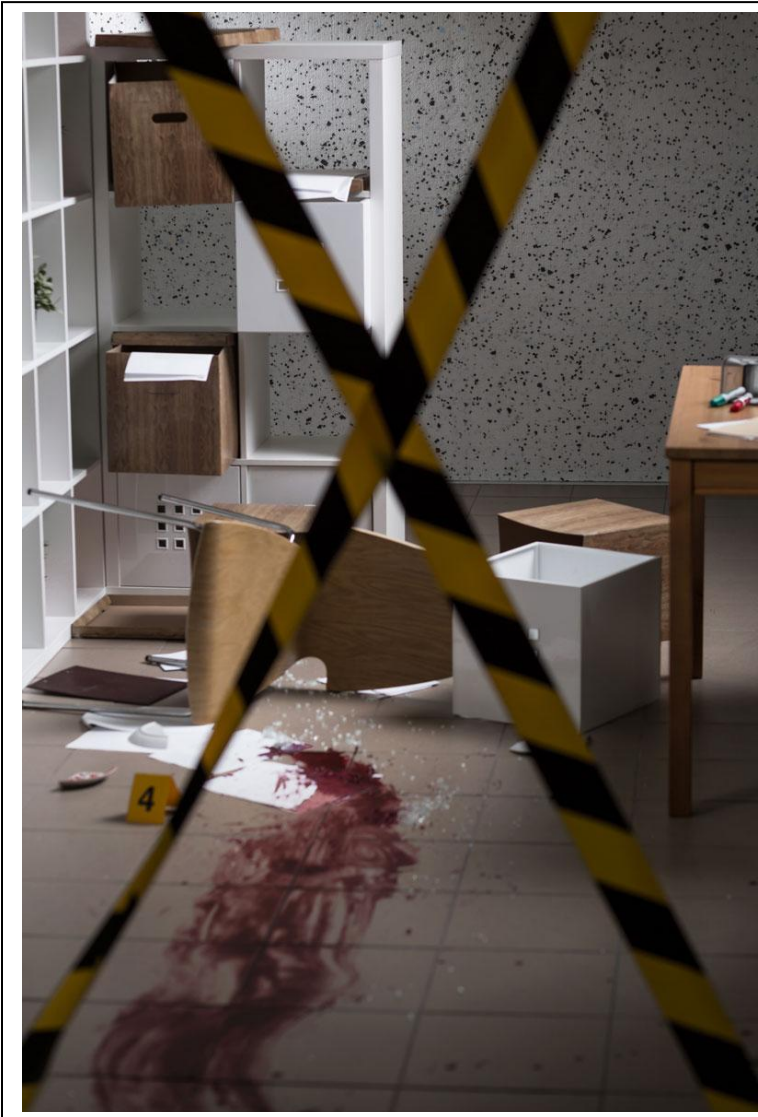




By Seth Augenstein, Senior Science Writer December 8, 2016

# Staged Crime Scenes: Suicide, Murder or Disappearance?



“There’s an appreciable number of cases that are missed because law enforcement does not follow a specific protocol, all because of personal agendas, sloppy piecemeal or a staged scene that fools an investigator. But those are the exception—not the rule,” said Vernon Geberth, renowned homicide expert, and author of the landmark textbook “Practical Homicide Investigation.”

Of course, no statistics are available due to the nature of the unknown category of deaths. But a panel of experts told Forensic Magazine that recent years have definitely shown an increase in killers who are trying to fool cops at their own game.

Each year, between 14,000 and 16,000 people are killed in the United States at the willful hand of another person.

But those are just the ones that are known, investigated and cataloged. How many go overlooked, from a person reported as a firearm suicide in their bedroom, to a missing person who is really lying in a shallow grave never to be found?

Some criminologists say there could be an “epidemic” of murders going overlooked during death investigations, as killers have learned to cover their tracks by staging crime scenes, hiding evidence and otherwise throwing death investigations off track. Others say that although there is an increase, homicide detectives are still catching the vast majority of attempts to conceal crimes.

Everyone seems to agree on one thing: the staged crime scene has become a more common phenomenon as the public has become more familiar and fascinated with detective work.

## **From Cain and Abel to the Petersons**

Homicides can be misclassified as suicides, accidents or disappearances in hundreds of cases a year, according to Laura Pettler, a North Carolina-based forensic criminologist.

Her book, “Crime Scene Staging Dynamics in Homicide Cases,” an exploration of the topic, was published last year by CRC Press. The book revisits criminal case histories stretching back to the story of Cain and Abel (“Am I my brother’s keeper?”), to Shakespeare’s version of the life of Macbeth (“Out, damned spot!”), through to high-profile homicides such as Susan Smith drowning her two sons in 1994 amid a bogus kidnapping story, and the brutal slaying of Laci Peterson by her husband Scott Peterson in 2002.

Pettler’s main focus is “intimicide”—a crime of passion killing between intimate partners. Though each case is unique, the most common intimicides

involve males killing females, and then making the scene look like a suicide or a disappearance. Pettler's book looks at the staged crime scene, and offers a methodology to reason out the totality of evidence, from the analysis of the initial 911 call, to lividity and rigor mortis offering clues about body positioning, and ballistics to verify whether the angle of a gunshot could be self-inflicted or not.

But the psychology and circumstantial evidence can also help guide an investigation, Pettler said. She advocates for analyzing the "victimology" of the deceased, as much as the physical forensic traces.

"America is hyper focused on physical evidence. Investigators can get tunnel vision on the forensic evidence," she said. "But the crime scene does not always put the weapon in the hands of the offender."

Pettler pointed to the case of Betty Lafon Neumar as just one possible example of how a crafty killer can get rid of a partner. Pettler was the district attorney's investigator on a cold case task force that determined the deaths of Neumar's five husbands and one son was suspicious. Then a 76-year-old grandmother, she was arrested in 2008 for the 1986 death of her fourth husband, Harold Gentry. But, Neumar died before she could stand trial, so she was never convicted of anything.

Whether it's slowly poisoning a husband, or shooting a wife and then putting the pistol in her hand, killers have come to realize that they can try to distort the forensic science to give them a chance at getting away with murder. The "CSI Effect" is well-known: popular depictions of criminal investigations on TV and in the media raise the expectations prosecutors have to meet, sometimes to an impossibly high standard.

### **The limits of forensic evidence**

But the "CSI Effect" also applies in another sense of the term: members of the public learn a little something about the actual process of criminal investigations. By knowing a bit about touch DNA, say, a garden-variety murderer may have a better chance at misdirecting the cops during a death investigation.

**"The problem is that criminals read the same books and watch the same TV shows as everyone else and therefore gain insight into the investigative process as well as the value of trace evidence," said Geberth, a retired NYPD homicide commander, whose work has**

**formed the basis of much of the study of staged crime scenes, including Pettler's.**

A textbook example of a death investigation that will always be equivocal is that of a person who dies in a fall from a great height, like from a cliff or a building, added Lawrence Kobilinsky, a professor of forensic science and chair of the Department of Sciences at John Jay College.

Even with a clear look into the physical and psychological evidence, it may not be obvious whether the deceased slipped and fell to his/her death, deliberately killed oneself, or was pushed, Kobilinsky said.

"With respect to staged scenes, I think sometimes they are obvious, but [other times] they are in situations where investigators are not very well trained and experienced with staging...incorrect conclusions can be reached with a whole set of different outcomes," said Kobilinsky. "Physical evidence can often tell you what occurred at a crime scene, but does not always tell you everything you need to know to accurately reconstruct the events of a crime.

"Do people get away with murder? No doubt that this happens," he added.

The statistics on the known, but unsolved, murders in America can appear staggering by itself. Some 200,000 unsolved homicides have piled up since the 1960s, experts estimated a few years ago. Kenneth Mains, president of the American Investigative Society of Cold Cases, said the reason cases may go unresolved is because of ego.

"It's a real troublesome trend, in a way," said Mains. "People need to put the victims and victims' families first. You can sit at your desks and wait for the call that never comes—or you can reach out to see if someone sees something you missed."

## **An increase, not but an epidemic**

**Geberth first wrote "Practical Homicide Investigation," the "Bible" for murder cops, in 1982. One of its earliest marquee case studies was a woman's death in a bathtub in New York City.**

A husband reported to police that his wife had committed suicide by ingesting pills and then submerging herself in water. Geberth and the homicide squad noticed bruises around the throat of the woman, and the husband explained he had pulled her out of the tub using force, to try mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The husband, who had a degree in criminal

justice and was himself awaiting appointment to the NYPD, knew police procedures and crime scene response.

But one minute detail leapt out at Geberth, already a veteran of death investigations at that point. He spotted the tiny hemorrhages in the wife's eyes—a tell-tale mark of strangulation.

**"It was very well done, by someone who was a graduate of the John Jay School of Criminal Justice, knew all about police procedure, and how police respond to a scene," Geberth recalls. "What he didn't know is forensics. I took one look into that gal's eyes, and I saw the petechial hemorrhages, and I knew what we were dealing with."**

**Suicides appear to be the most commonly staged scene. Geberth says it's because a suicide scene can be more of a challenge than even a clear homicide, if all the work is being done appropriately.**

**Geberth believes there are seven common mistakes in suicide investigations that could be providing murderers with a chance to get away with their crime, he wrote in Law and Order Magazine in 2013. Too many detectives assuming the case is a suicide is a major foible. Every death needs to be considered as a well-plotted and concealed homicide, he writes. Investigators need to consider the victimology of the dead. Most importantly, they need to consider all the psychological and physical evidence in its totality, and take each factor of the scene and the death to its ultimate conclusions.**

**"There's no brain surgery involved here, it's just doing your basic investigative duties," said Geberth, a strong advocate of checklists and attention to detail in even mundane investigative duties.**

**The increase in staged scenes is there, Geberth concludes, but it's not rampant. Investigators generally do their job, and faked suicides, accidents and disappearances are generally caught—even if the offenders have learned a thing or two from TV police procedurals, he said.**

**"We've always had staged crime scenes. We have more cases now where people are trying to mislead cops," he said. "But it is not an epidemic."**