

# Crime Scene Staging and Its Detection

Robert R. Hazelwood  
Michael R. Napier

**Abstract:** *Crime scene staging is a recognized phenomenon within the criminal justice field. This article defines the occurrence for staging, identifies the motives for staging, and identifies the act that precipitated the staging. It reports the results of an exploratory survey of 20 well-versed and highly trained law enforcement officers' experience with staging in fatal and nonfatal incidents, and it reports the most commonly observed forms of crime scene staging. Investigative strategies and indicators of staging are also presented.*

**Keywords:** *homicide; sexual homicide; autoerotic fatalities; staging; crime scene staging; crime scene; false allegations; false allegations of sexual assault; criminal motivation*

Crime scene staging has been documented since biblical times. One of the earliest accounts deals with a young man named Joseph. His brothers sold him into slavery and then conspired to convince their father, Jacob, that wild animals had killed and devoured Joseph. To support their story, they slaughtered a goat and dipped Joseph's robe into the blood. Jacob was convinced of Joseph's death and became extremely distraught (Genesis 37: 1-35).

Maugham (1938) once wrote the following: "The drama is make-believe. It does not deal with truth but with effect" (p. 39). This statement was certainly accurate in Joseph's story, and it is true in modern staging incidents as well. Staged crimes challenge the investigators' intelligence, emotions, and experience. Stimulating cases, a multiplicity of motives, and practical investigative guidelines will be provided in this article.

In staged scenes, the offender is either intentionally or unintentionally engaging in a kind of chess game with the police, with the crime scene representing the game board. The staging offender manipulates the scene in an attempt to mislead, confuse, and take investigators into corridors that lead nowhere. Few individuals intend to game play with the police when they stage a crime. Most individuals simply want to direct the police away from themselves. However, when a crime

---

NOTE: The authors would like to express their appreciation to and thank the following individuals for manuscript review and their helpful comments: Richard L. Ault, Jr., Ph.D.; Kenneth P. Baker; Roger L. Depue, Ph.D.; Elaine Fox; Wayne Lord, Ph.D.; R. Stephen Mardigian; Larry E. McCann; Peter A. Smerick; and David Stubbins, Ph.D.

International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 48(6), 2004 744-759

DOI: 10.1177/0306624X04268298

© 2004 Sage Publications

744

scene has been staged, game playing is present in one form or another; and although not common, there are some staging offenders who view themselves as superior to society in general and law enforcement in particular.

Unless otherwise noted, at least one of the authors was involved as either an expert witness or as a consultant in each of the cases presented in this article.

### DEFINITION

Expanding on earlier definitions (Douglas & Munn, 1992; Geberth, 2003; Napier & Baker, 2002), *staging* is defined as the purposeful alteration of a crime or crime scene in an attempt to mislead investigators and frustrate the criminal justice process.

Although it is recognized that a person may stage a crime by simply lying verbally or in writing about facts or circumstances (e.g., “I was raped,” “I was robbed,” “The firm’s accountant is embezzling funds.”), this article will only address those situations in which physical staging has occurred in death-related cases, or those false allegations of sexual assault that are accompanied by physical trauma, torn or missing clothing, destruction of property, forced entry, or claimed abduction.

The staging of scenes pertaining to property crimes (i.e., destruction of property for insurance claims) will not be addressed specifically, although it is recognized that the dynamics of such a false claim may be quite similar to those presented in this article. It is noted that we recognize that not all staged scenes necessarily involve crimes, *per se*. For example, an autoerotic death (i.e., accidental and noncriminal death) that has been staged as a homicide (criminal death) or suicide (noncriminal death in most jurisdictions) may or may not be termed a *staged crime scene* depending on the view of the investigator. We will refer to all such scenes as being staged crime scenes.

### PREVALENCE

To our knowledge, there are no statistics maintained on documented staged crime scenes. However, we agree with Geberth (1996), who wrote the following: “These events seem to be on the increase as people learn more about the process of death investigation through the media, true crime books, television mystery shows, and movies” (p. 323).

Because of the paucity of information about staged crimes and in an attempt to provide the reader with some insight on the prevalence of staged crimes, we conducted an exploratory survey of 20 active and retired law enforcement officers who were known to have extensive experience in violent crime investigation.

## METHODOLOGY

The participants in the survey, all of whom we personally know, were selected from a cadre of highly trained and experienced law enforcement investigators. Because of their expertise in criminal investigative analysis (Napier & Baker, 2002), these individuals have been consultants to their own and other agencies in a wide variety of violent crimes against persons. The participants represented city, state, and federal law enforcement agencies from Washington, D.C., two provinces in Canada, and the states of California, Florida, Iowa, Nebraska, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.

One of the authors (Napier) telephonically contacted each respondent and, after advising them of the nature of the inquiry and providing them with the working definition of staging set forth in this article, asked a structured series of questions dealing with the officer's anecdotal experience in such occurrences.

Because criminal investigators generally do not keep numerical records of the cases or consultations that they have participated in during their career, the officers were asked to approximate the number of violent crimes that they had been involved with and the number of fatal and nonfatal staged crimes that they had encountered. Their estimates were from memory and without benefit of reviewing case statistics or other case materials. It should be noted that because of their crime consultant status, the survey participants were exposed to a particularly large number of complex violent crime scenarios and that consequently, staged crimes may be overrepresented in their casebooks. The findings presented in this article are not intended to provide detailed predictive analyses but rather to report investigative perceptions. Therefore, the survey results should not be generalized. Although we did not participate in the survey, our experience is consistent with the findings of the survey.

The respondents had 560 cumulative years of law enforcement experience, averaging 28 years per officer. They collectively estimated that they had either investigated or consulted on 33,630 violent crimes, averaging 1,682 crimes per officer. They also estimated experience with 903 staged crimes, with an average of 45 such cases per officer. It is worth noting that staged crimes within this group represented less than 3% of the estimated case experience of 33,630. Of the 903 staged crimes, 411 dealt with staging of death scenes, and 492 involved nonfatal false allegations of sexual assault.

## MOTIVATION

Determining the motive is one of the key issues to be resolved in any criminal investigation. In staged crimes, learning the motive will more often than not lead to the person responsible. We suggest that in every staged crime, the investigator

is confronted with determining the motive for two different behaviors: (a) the original act that necessitated the staging (i.e., homicide, false allegation of rape, autoerotic death) and (b) the staging itself.

Douglas and Munn (1992) wrote that “there are two reasons why someone employs staging: to redirect the investigation away from the most logical suspect or to protect the victim or victim’s family” (p. 251). We agree that there are two motives for the staging of a crime; however, one or more operational motives are also at work for the original act.

#### MOTIVE FOR THE ORIGINAL ACT

The first question to be answered is why did the person commit the crime (i.e., homicide) or pretend to commit a crime (i.e., false allegation of sexual assault). Although the possibilities are seemingly endless, we have found the following motives to be most commonly associated with staged crimes.

*Greed.* *Greed* is defined as an intense desire for money or property. Examples of greed-motivated homicides include staging the crime as a sex-related homicide or as a robbery-related homicide, as in the following case.

##### Case No. 1

An executive came home from a business trip and after having dinner with his wife, he went to his office to prepare for a board meeting on the following day. He told the police that 2 hours later, he returned home and discovered his wife dead. She had been beaten with a blunt object, stabbed in the chest, and her throat had been cut. Missing from the residence were several valuable pieces of diamond jewelry.

In a garbage bin some miles from the scene, the missing jewelry, the knife used to stab the victim, and a piece of pipe about 2 feet in length by 2 inches wide and with caps screwed on either end were discovered.

Investigators deemed it very unlikely that an intruder would kill the victim during a robbery only to later discard the jewelry. It was learned that the husband was having an affair and killed his wife because her signature was necessary to dispose of the couple’s property. The motive for the original act in this case was greed, and the motive for the staging of the scene was simply self-preservation (i.e., to mislead the police as to the person responsible). The husband was tried and convicted of the murder.

*Anger-revenge.* This term is defined as strong feelings of hostility accompanied by a desire for retribution. In the following case, the victim ended an affair she was having with her employer. He killed the victim and staged the scene to appear as an autoerotic fatality.

### **Case No. 2**

A distraught man called a small police department and reported that he had found his employee dead in her apartment. The responding officers found the victim hanging from a hook on her bedroom closet door. Initially the police believed they were looking at a homicide or suicide, and when they voiced this opinion, the man suggested to them that it might be an autoerotic fatality.

Not being familiar with such deaths, the police asked him to explain. He provided them with sufficient information to acquaint them with this dangerous activity, and they began to look at the death from a different perspective.

In this case, the staging offender must have experienced a great deal of frustration. Not only did he stage the homicide to appear to be an autoerotic fatality (accidental death), but the investigators did not recognize it as such, and the offender had to define and describe the practice to them. It was ironic that in doing so, he aroused the suspicions of the police, and eventually he was tried and convicted of the woman's murder. His motive for the original act of homicide was anger-revenge, and the motive for staging the scene was to mislead the police as to the person responsible.

One of the most unusual examples of a staged death scene, motivated by anger-revenge, involved the suicide of a police officer that he had manipulated to appear as a duty-related homicide.

### **Case No. 3**

An on-duty police officer called his station and reported that he was in a region of the county well known for drug dealing. He reported that he had observed some individuals attempting to avoid his patrol car by going into a heavily wooded area and that he was going to check it out. The operator told him that he was out of his patrol area and to wait for backup. Residents in the area reported hearing 2 to 3 gunshots shortly after that call. The responding officers quickly found the body because the victim's flashlight was turned on and led them to their dead colleague's location.

The officer had been shot in the head with his own weapon. Three rounds had been fired from the gun, and an intensive search of the woods located one round at some distance to his right front and a second round at a distance to his left front. All of his personal effects and police equipment were still in place.

Initially, it was believed that the officer had died in the line of duty and that the two rounds had been fired at his assailants before they overpowered him. However, the investigation revealed that the individual had been chronically ridiculed by members of his shift for writing a large number of traffic tickets but avoiding real police work. It was determined that the officer had no friends on the department and was known as a loner.

The gun that he used to kill himself had belonged to his best friend, a security guard who had been attacked while on duty, was overpowered, and was fatally shot with the same weapon some months before the officer's death. The officer was emotionally traumatized by his close friend's death and had practically begged the man's sister to sell him the gun. The dead officer's mother reported

that within the month prior to her son's death, he taped the televised funeral of a police officer from another department who died in the line of duty and repeatedly watched the funeral tape.

It was the author's (Hazelwood) opinion that the officer was very much aware that he had no respect among his colleagues and that he staged his death to prove that he was not only a real policeman but one who had heroically died in the line of duty. Through this act, he hoped to create guilt and remorse in his fellow officers for their ridicule and thereby obtain revenge. He wanted them to believe that it was their fault that he was dead.

*Attention.* This motive is associated with false allegations of sexual assault. However, the investigator can also expect to find attention seeking in staged burglaries, robberies, break-ins, and petty vandalism. In our experience with false allegations of sexual assault, the motive for the original act (i.e., complaining of a nonexistent sexual assault) is most often the attention that will be given as a result of his or her complaint. The motive for the staging is to mislead the police into believing that someone other than the pseudovictim was responsible. The following case was reported to us and provides the reader with an excellent example of such a staged crime.

#### Case No. 4

A single 35-year-old woman reported a brutal sexual assault to the police. She stated that she returned home at midnight after working for 8 hours. Hearing a noise in her basement, she went to investigate and was confronted by a large male who struck her across the forehead with a bat-like object. He then cut her with a knife and sexually assaulted her. The assailant warned her against reporting the attack and promised that if she did, he would return and finish the job. Her hands and arms had been severely cut, however none of the wounds were life threatening. The victim was treated at a hospital, and the police strongly advised her not to return home that evening. She disregarded the advice and went home.

Sometime later, she called the police and reported that the man had returned, inflicted additional injuries, and sexually assaulted her a second time. During this latter assault, the man had torn the stitches from her earlier wounds. She provided the police with a cut-and-paste note in which the so-called attacker blamed the second attack on the victim for reporting the earlier assault.

The victim eventually admitted that she had staged both attacks and agreed to seek professional mental health care. She reported being under a great deal of stress and said that she wanted someone to pay attention to her problems for a change.

*Game playing.* To our knowledge, this is the least common motive and is only observed in suicides or homicides. In Case No. 5, the decedent committed suicide but staged the scene so it would appear to be a homicide. There were two motives for the original act (i.e., suicide). The first motive was a general sense of life failure, which would correctly be categorized under "Other" (see below), and the sec-

ond motive was to engage in a final round of game playing with associates and police. The motive for the staging of the scene was to mislead police as to the manner of death (homicide), thereby convincing them that he had been murdered.

#### **Case No. 5**

A 20-year-old university student was found dead in the concrete stairwell of his dormitory. The cause of death was blunt force trauma resulting from his fall from the third-floor walkway of the stairwell. There were no defense wounds and no trauma to the body other than that caused by the fall. He was fully clothed except for shoes.

The stairwell walkways had walls 3 feet high to prevent accidental falls. The young man was a sophomore at the university, on an academic scholarship, and was known to be terrified of heights. At the time of his death, he was in the middle of examinations, and although several students were studying near the stairwell, no one heard screams at the time he fell to his death.

It was learned that although he was a highly intelligent person, his grades were near failing and that he was a reclusive individual who had associates but no friends at the university. He had no girlfriends, although he was attracted to a woman who was involved with another male student.

All of his known associates were fellow members of the university's game club. He was an avid player and would become very upset when he lost a game. On his computer screen, there was a cryptic message alluding to death, and on his bed, a Knave's card from a Tarot deck was found. The knave was standing on his tiptoes at the edge of a precipice, and his back was toward the obvious danger.

The police investigation determined that the young man was experiencing multiple stressors and was about to lose his scholarship. One of us testified at a coroner's inquest for more than 4 hours and expressed the opinion that the young man was playing his final game by staging his suicide as a homicide and had left the cryptic message on his screen and the Tarot card on his bed as clues to his death. He chose a means (i.e., jumping to his death) that was absolutely inconsistent with his known fear of heights, and it was believed that he did so in a deliberate attempt to mislead the investigators and others as to the manner of death. The inquest ruled that the death was a suicide.

*Other.* In rare cases, the investigator will find that the motive for the original act is not a comfortable match with one of the four motives presented earlier. For example, if the original act was an autoerotic fatality as in Case Nos. 6 and 7 or a suicide as in Case Nos. 3 and 5, no crime or pseudocrime has occurred. In an act of dangerous autoeroticism, the motive is not death but psychosexual gratification. In a suicide, the motive is most often to remove oneself from what is perceived to be overwhelming and irresolvable stress. In the case of a false allegation of sexual assault, the motive for claiming the assault may be to conceal some inappropriate behavior (e.g., a teenager not coming home on time), the possible loss of a relationship, or the approval and acceptance of others.

## MOTIVE FOR STAGING THE CRIME SCENE

The next question to be answered is why did the staging offender manipulate the scene to represent something other than what it was. He or she may do so by trying to mislead the investigator as to either (a) the manner of death (i.e., homicide, suicide, accident, natural, or other), (b) the cause of death (i.e., medical reason for the death), or (c) the motive for the original act (i.e., greed, anger-revenge, attention, game playing, or other). We have termed these motives *self-preservation* and *embarrassment-shame*. These are the essential and crucial reasons for crime scene staging, and one or both of them will always be present.

*Self-preservation.* This motive is what Douglas and Munn (1992) are referring to when they write of “redirect(ing) the investigation away from the most logical suspect” (p. 251). In such instances, the staging offender is concerned with protecting his or her identity and will manipulate the scene, the clothing, or the victim’s body to deflect attention away from himself or herself.

*Embarrassment-shame.* This motive is much more magnanimous in nature than the one previously mentioned. When this motive is operative, the staging offender is attempting to provide the victim with a degree of dignity (e.g., redressing the body) or to allow the family to remember the victim in a more generous sense than the original scene would have allowed (e.g., victim dies during dangerous autoerotic activities). Such staging incidents are less offensive, perhaps even less criminal in nature, and certainly less likely to be prosecuted (see Case No. 7).

It must be noted, however, that in some cases, the person rearranging the scene does so because of his or her own sense of awkwardness or self-consciousness. Such staging offenders are first and foremost embarrassed for themselves, although they may also profess embarrassment for the victim. Such a case was reported to us.

### Case No. 6

A military police desk sergeant received a call from a hysterical woman who reported that her husband was dead. She stated that she had returned home from shopping and found her husband stabbed to death. Investigators responding to the scene found the dead military officer lying on the floor in the couple’s bedroom with a stab wound near his right clavicle. The officer was nude except for combat boots, socks, and a black leather belt. A striation around his left thigh matched the width of a strap for a scuba diver’s knife sheath that was found near the body.

Adjacent to the body was an exercise bar that could be expanded to fit between door facings, a rope, and a dildo. The bleeding from the stab wound was minimal and indicated drainage because of gravity rather than a flow, which would be expected if the person were still living when the wound was inflicted.

The investigators recognized the probability of an autoerotic death scene, and when confronted, the wife eventually admitted that she had returned home from a shopping trip and found her husband dead and suspended from the exercise bar. She told them that she had found him engaged in the same behavior on an earlier occasion and that he had promised to never do it again. When she found him dead, she panicked, and being embarrassed for herself and her husband, she took him down, removed the rope from his neck and the sheath from his thigh, and stabbed him in an attempt to have the crime appear to be a homicide.

### TYPES OF STAGED CRIMES

The types of crime scenes that may be staged are limited only by the imagination of a person. Meloy (2002) writes of a homicide committed during narcissistic rage and then staged as a sexually related homicide, McDowell (1983) and Adair and Doberson (1999) report on suicides staged as homicides. Imajo (1983) writes about suicides staged as traffic accidents. Finally, Geberth (1996) reports on homicides staged as sex-related crimes, as burglary-related deaths, and as traffic accidents.

We are aware of greed-motivated homicides staged as sexual homicides, greed-motivated homicides staged as satanic crimes, anger-motivated homicides staged as home-invasion homicides, anger-motivated homicides staged as autoerotic fatalities (see Case No. 2), autoerotic fatalities staged as suicides (see Case No. 7), pseudovictims staging violent sexual assaults (see Case No. 4), greed-motivated homicides staged as robbery-related deaths (see Case No. 1), suicides staged as homicides (see Case Nos. 3 and 5), and autoerotic fatalities staged as homicides (see Case No. 6).

### PSEUDOBOUNDARIES IN CRIME SCENE STAGING

#### DEATH-RELATED STAGED SCENES

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” (p. 20). He then qualified his reasoning for not including such rearranging of scenes when he wrote that “these activities are certainly understandable considering the shock experienced by a relative who encounters the sudden and violent death of a loved one” (p. 20). Had Geberth not included the phrase “or redress a loved one who . . . has died in an embarrassing situation,” we would have no disagreement. However, the term *embarrassing situation* can refer to a wide variety of occurrences.

We agree that it would be perfectly understandable if a family member covered a loved one who died of a heart attack while sleeping in the nude, in the shower,

getting dressed, or even having sex. In such situations, it is apparent that there was no “conscious criminal action . . . to thwart an investigation” (Geberth, 1996, p. 20) nor was there any intention of purposely altering the crime scene in an attempt to mislead investigators and frustrate the criminal justice system. However, it would not be understandable or acceptable for anyone to redress a person who died in the nude while hanging. To do so alters the scene in a manner that cannot be restored (see Case No. 7).

When the location has been intentionally rearranged to mislead the investigator as to the means or manner of death, it has been staged, and the classification is certainly applicable. Douglas and Munn (1992) agreed when they wrote in *Crime Classification Manual* that “there are two reasons why someone employs staging: to redirect the investigation away from the most logical suspect or to *protect the victim or victim’s family*” (p. 251; italics added). Adair and Doberson (1999) also wrote that “suicides may be staged or even altered by family members or friends in an attempt to avoid embarrassment or for other personal, social, or religious reasons” (p. 1309). In both cases, we use the term staging or staged to describe the situation. Sparing the relatives embarrassment or shame should not enter into the decision on whether to categorize or investigate a scene as staged.

#### Case No. 7

A man returned home from work and called out for his 14-year-old son. Receiving no response, he decided to wash some clothes and went to the laundry room. On entering the room, he saw his son sitting on a stool, cross-dressed in his mother’s lingerie, with a rope around his neck, and attached to a hook in the ceiling.

After determining that his son was dead, he removed the ligature from his neck, undressed him, put the mother’s lingerie back in her clothes drawer, redressed the boy in his own clothes, and re-placed the ligature around his neck. He then called the police to report his son’s suicide.

He later admitted that he had rearranged the scene so as to spare his wife the embarrassment, shame, and humiliation associated with their son’s death.

If an investigator is confronted with a situation as described in the above case and it is not categorized or investigated as a staged scene, then, by extension, it would seem that one must also eliminate the consideration of staging when an autoerotic death is made to appear as a homicide, if the motive for doing so is to spare the reputation of the victim or the feelings of the family (see Case No. 6). Suffice it to say that when one attempts to limit the types of incidents that can be classified as staged, then the proverbial Pandora’s box will open.

#### NONFATAL SCENE STAGING

It is apparent that Geberth (1996) as well as Douglas and Munn (1992) were specifically addressing the staging of scenes involving fatal situations. We believe that false allegations of rape (Hazelwood & Burgess, 2001) and other sexual assaults should also be included as a category of staging when the pseudovictim

attempts to convince the police that a sexual assault has taken place by (a) physically altering the condition of his or her clothing by tearing, removing, cutting, burning, or claiming the offender took the items and/or (b) arranging the scene to make it appear as though a struggle occurred or that forced entry or theft took place, and/or (c) claiming an abduction occurred, and/or (d) intentionally injuring himself or herself. Case No. 8 was reported to us and is an excellent example of such a staged crime.

#### **Case No. 8**

Aliyson reported to the police that she had returned home late at night, and when she parked her car, she noticed that the words "Kill Aliyson" and "Blood Spill" had been printed in chalk on the brick siding of her home. Thinking it was the work of pranksters, she stepped onto her porch and saw the words "F—k Aliyson" in chalk on the floor of the porch. When she inserted her key in the lock, she saw "Blood Spill" and "Kill Aliyson" in chalk on her door facing.

She advised that she was not concerned, and she entered her home and was confronted by a large man who beat her and raped her. The man then dragged her into the woods near her home and inserted a tree limb into her vaginal canal sufficiently far enough that it had to be surgically removed.

In Case Nos. 6 and 8, there was a clear attempt by the staging offender to manipulate the scene and mislead the police. By definition, each of these situations merit being termed staged scenes.

### **MOST FREQUENTLY OBSERVED STAGED SCENES**

Geberth (1996) wrote the following:

The most common type of "staging" occurs when the perpetrator changes elements of the scene to make the death appear to be a suicide or accident in order 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. (pp. 20-21)

He went on to state that "arson represents another type of staging. The offender purposely torches the crime scene to destroy evidence or make the death appear to (be) the result of an accidental fire" (p. 21). We agree with Geberth that an arson would be a staged crime if the purpose was to make it appear to be an accidental fire. However, if the purpose was simply to destroy evidence, we would respectfully disagree that it was a staged crime. In such cases, the arson would simply be a continuation of the crime via the destruction of evidence by fire (i.e., rape to murder).

The 20 law enforcement professionals who participated in the survey reported that in their experience, nonfatal false allegations of sexual assault were the most common form of staging, followed by staging homicides as burglary-related or

robbery-related crimes, staging the manner of death, and finally, staging homicides as sexually-related crimes.

#### NONFATAL STAGED SCENES

The 20 officers estimated that of the 903 staged crimes with which they had experience, 492 (55%) dealt with nonfatal false allegations of sexual assault. This figure represents more than half of the staged crimes reported by the participants. Consequently, false allegations of sexual assault were the most commonly staged crimes encountered by these experienced investigators.

In addition to being the most frequently observed, false allegation of sexual assault is also the most politically sensitive staged crime dealt with by investigators. The infamous false allegation of kidnap and rape by Tawanna Brawley in upstate New York became a national media event.

#### Case No. 9

Brawley, a 15-year-old Black female, disappeared after getting off a bus in her neighborhood in Dutchess County, New York. Four days later, she was found behind a townhouse in which her family had previously resided. Her hair had been cut, a soot-like substance had been used to print “KKK” and “nigger” on her chest and abdomen, and the frontal area of her jeans had been burned away. Her body had also been smeared with feces.

Speaking through her mother and aunt, she advised that she had been abducted by four to six White police officers and kept for several days without food or water in a wooded area. She alleged that she had been sexually assaulted and that the rapists had urinated and defecated on her body.

A media event ensued and great political pressure was brought to bear on the governor’s office to intervene. Governor Cuomo directed the New York attorney general to take charge of the investigation, and as a result, the New York Bureau of Criminal Investigation assumed investigative jurisdiction in the matter. Because of the racial implications, the FBI also began an investigation into possible civil rights violations.

The results of a comprehensive and extremely thorough criminal, medical, and mental health investigation was provided via testimony to an empaneled New York grand jury. The grand jury found insufficient evidence to support the allegation. Unfortunately, by the time the jury arrived at its decision, a great amount of state and federal resources had been wasted.

#### STAGED SCENES INVOLVING FATALITIES

Of the 20 officers, 12 (60%) reported that homicide staged to appear as burglary or robbery motivated was the most common type of staged scene involving death. Five of the 20 officers (25%) stated that staging the manner of death (i.e., homicide, suicide, accident, natural) was the most common form in their experi-

ence, and 3 of the 20 respondents (15%) advised that homicides staged to appear as sexually related crimes were most common.

## INVESTIGATIVE STRATEGIES

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. The scene is literally a warehouse of information that, if well documented through photographs and videotape, sketches, and police reports, can be returned to again and again for additional information. Through such documentation, the crime becomes fixed. It remains changeless over time, simply awaiting additional observation and interpretation. The following presents a logical fact-finding progression through the analytical investigation of a staged crime.

### INVESTIGATIVE STEPS

1. Conduct a comprehensive and thorough review of the documented scene, giving little thought to the time involved.
2. Study and take account of the victim (i.e., victimology).
3. Identify and document all indicators of staging (see below).
4. Identify and document possible motives for the original act and for the staging of the crime.
5. Determine who would have benefitted from the original act and the staging of the scene. Keep in mind that the responsible person may be the victim, even in death-related cases.

### SOURCES OF INFORMATION

When confronted with a crime scene that may have been staged, the investigator has two critical sources of information available: (a) the victim and (b) the scene. It is through comprehensive scrutiny and comparison of these two sources that the officer will be able to identify those factors indicative of a staged crime scene.

It has been our experience that victimology is most often the key in both fatal and nonfatal staged crimes. A comprehensive understanding of the victim will necessitate the investigator obtaining information about his or her lifestyle, sexual habits, occupation, attitudes, reputation, drug and alcohol use, personal associations, physical condition, security concerns, and geographic profile (i.e., residence, place of occupation, hangouts, locations of frequent visitation; Napier & Baker, 2002; Napier & Hazelwood, 2003).

## INDICATORS OF A STAGED SCENE

Douglas and Munn (1992) wrote that “the same forces that influence normal everyday conduct also influence the offender’s actions during an offense” (p. 249). Later they wrote 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” (p. 253).

Douglas and Munn (1992) refer to staging indicators as “Red Flags at the Crime Scene” and “Forensic Red Flags.” Their focus is on recognizing crime scene inconsistencies, and they provide the reader with examples of such inconsistencies. Although Geberth (1996) does not specifically address indicators or red flags, he does take his reader through five crimes that were staged and directs the readers’ attention to factors that lead to the conclusion that the crimes were in fact staged. Again, the focus is on inconsistencies.

We concur that the successful determination of whether a crime has been staged is based on the recognition of inconsistencies. There are three specific areas in which inconsistencies may be found, and we have chosen to term them as follows: (a) *victim-centered*, (b) *immediate location*, and (c) *distant locations*.

The term *victim-centered* refers to information about the victim (i.e., victimology) and those elements of the crime that directly impact upon the victim (i.e., sexual assault, injuries, clothing disarray, etc.). Immediate location refers to significant facts or conditions present at the scene, near the scene, or around the alleged assault location (i.e., forced entry, items taken or destroyed, signs of struggle, TV on or off, etc.). Finally, the term *distant locations* refers to other geographic locations associated with the crime, such as where the body was disposed of, car disposal site, or even a location where a pseudovictim alleges she was taken.

All behaviors and other significant facts about the crime are placed in one of these three categories. The investigator then compares what he observes in and across each category with what he would expect to observe in similar situations, basing those expectations on his education, training, and experience. In other words, does what he observes make sense? If the investigator observes inconsistencies, they must be explained.

## THE OFFENDER IN STAGED CRIMES

The most important question to be answered in a staged crime investigation is the identity of the responsible person. Douglas and Munn (1992) wrote that “when a crime 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). The survey of the 20 officers mentioned earlier in this article validates the opinion of Douglas and Munn. In an attempt to

further educate the reader, the officers were asked to provide additional information about the staging offenders with whom they had experience.

#### NONFATAL STAGED SEXUAL ASSAULTS

The participating officers unanimously reported that the staging offender is most often a White female. When asked to approximate the age range of the staging offender, 13 of the 20 officers (65%) advised that the most common age was between 21 and 30, 5 officers (25%) reported that 31 to 45 was the most common age, and 2 (10%) of the officers advised that the most common age was between 15 and 20.

#### STAGED SCENES INVOLVING FATALITIES

Nineteen of the 20 officers (95%) stated that the staging offender in staged scenes involving fatalities is most often White, and they unanimously reported that the person staging the crime was most often male. When asked about the relationship between the victim and the killer, 17 of the 20 officers (85%) reported that the offender was or had been an intimate partner of the victim, 2 of the 20 officers (10%) advised that the offender was an acquaintance, and 1 (5%) reported the offender as "other." When asked about the most common age range of the staging offender, 13 of the 20 officers (65%) stated an age range between 26 and 35, 5 of the 20 officers (25%) stated that they were most commonly between 36 and 45 years old, and 2 (10%) advised that 21 to 25 was the most common age of the staging offender.

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 crimes 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.

#### SUMMARY

This article addresses very serious situations that involve what Somerset Maugham called "make believe." Crime scene staging is an attempt to mislead investigators and frustrate the criminal justice process. This manipulation may take place by simply lying verbally or in writing about facts or circumstances or by physically rearranging a scene, body, or property. Although there are no statistics maintained on such incidents, the observations of a group of 20 highly trained and experienced investigators suggest that less than 3% of violent crimes against persons are staged.

The types of staged scenes that may confront the investigator are limited by only the imagination of the staging offender and can include fatal and nonfatal incidents. In staged crimes, the investigator must recognize that motives are

operative for the original fatal or nonfatal act (i.e., greed, anger-revenge, attention, game playing) and also for the staging process (i.e., self-preservation, embarrassment-shame).

To guide the investigator, five investigative steps are suggested; however, the successful determination as to whether a crime has been staged is dependent on the investigator's ability to recognize and document inconsistencies that center around the victim and the geographic locations involved in the crime.

## REFERENCES

- Adair, T. W., & Doberson, M. J. (1999). A case of suicidal hanging staged as homicide. *Journal of Forensic Science, 44*(6), 1307-1309.
- Douglas, J. E., & Munn, C. M. (1992). The detection of staging and personation at the crime scene. In J. E. Douglas, A. W. Burgess, A. G. Burgess, & R. K. Ressler (Eds.), *Crime classification manual* (pp. 249-252). New York: Lexington Books.
- Geberth, V. J. (1996). *Practical homicide investigation* (3rd ed.). Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
- Geberth, V. J. (2003). *Sex-related homicide investigation* (p. 323). Boca Raton, FL: CSC Press.
- Hazelwood, R. R., & Burgess, A. W. (Eds.). (2001). *Practical aspects of rape investigation: A multidisciplinary approach* (3rd ed.). Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
- Imajo, T. (1983). Suicide by motor vehicle. *Journal of Forensic Science, 28*, 83-89.
- Maugham, W. S. (1938). The summing up. In *Collected works of W. S. Maugham* (p. 39). New York: Doubleday.
- McDowell, C. P. (1983). Suicide disguised as murder: A dimension of Munchausen Syndrome. *Journal of Forensic Science, 32*, 254-261.
- Meloy, J. R. (2002). Spousal homicide and the subsequent staging of a sexual homicide at a distant location. *Journal of Forensic Science, 47*(2), 395-398.
- Napier, M. R., & Baker, K. P. (2002). Criminal personality profiling. In S. H. James, & J. J. Nordby (Eds.), *Forensic science: An introduction to scientific and investigative techniques* (pp. 531-550). Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
- Napier, M. R., & Hazelwood, R. R. (2003). Homicide investigation: The significance of victimology. *National Academy Associate, 5*, 14-15, 21-22, 30-32.

**Robert R. Hazelwood, M.S., FBI (ret.)**

The Academy Group, Inc.  
7542 Diplomat Drive  
Manassas, Virginia 20109  
USA

**Michael R. Napier, B.S., FBI (ret.)**

The Academy Group, Inc.  
7542 Diplomat Drive  
Manassas, Virginia 20109  
USA