

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATOR

We've all seen the TV programmes, watched the movies, read the books. But have you ever wondered what the life of a Crime Scene Investigator is really like?

In this, the first of a series of articles about Justice sector workers, we take a look at a typical day in the life of a Crime Scene Investigator (CSI).

Nicola Walker is Scenes of Crime Officer at Cambridgeshire Constabulary. She is one of seven people doing the job, along with a Senior CSI and three Assistants. Together, they cover a radius of around 20 miles.

They work shifts, ensuring that the office is staffed 24 hours a day (though between 11pm and 7am one person will be on call). According to Nicola, they are busiest during social hours, from 8am to 5pm.

“Most crimes are reported in the morning, as people come downstairs to find they’ve been burgled, realise their car has been stolen, or arrive at work to discover a break-in.”

07.00 – the first CSI in the office deals with urgent cases such as ram-raids. They need attending as quickly as possible, as often the scene won't be secure, and the 'victim' of the crime, commonly termed the 'aggrieved', will be at the scene waiting. The longer they remain there, the more chance there is of losing or contaminating evidence.



The most common crimes that a CSI is faced with in a morning are burglary and car crime. Thankfully, serious crimes such as murders are less common in Cambridgeshire, but if a murder has occurred overnight, the on-call CSI would have attended immediately.

Usually, crimes are reported to the control room, creating an incident, and a Police Officer will attend the scene first. If they decide that a crime has been committed, and that there may be evidence to gather at the scene, the Officer refers the case to the team via a database, which they use to manage their workload.

“We have a policy whereby we attend every burglary of a dwelling. In other instances, the Police Officer may need to make a judgement about whether or not to call us in. Every Police Officer, as part of their initial training, will have some forensic training, and they spend a day with us too.”

08.00 – the time most of the team start work. Jobs are allocated by area, and then prioritised. The most pressing cases might have evidence that could be lost, such as an outdoor footprint or blood sample.

09.00 – Nicola arrives at the first scene of the day, in this example a burglary. First, she introduces herself to the aggrieved, clearly displaying her ID. She then asks them to show her around the crime scene, prompting them to tell her what they think has happened, including how they think the burglar got in and out, and what they think has been taken. She asks questions along the way but keeps an open mind.

Initially, Nicola looks, listens, and gathers information. Do windows and doors look like they've been forced? Does it seem the burglar entered from the garden? She looks at windowsills, flowerbeds, fences – all could contain crucial evidence.

“All of this is helping me build up an MO (modus operandi, meaning method of operation). The kind of property, how they seem to have got in, how they searched, the time and day of the crime – all this is logged and can be linked to other crimes.”

Now's the time to start gathering evidence. Outside is done first in case of bad weather. Anything that might not last is photographed to scale (all CSIs are trained in photography).

The point of entry is examined first. Nicola checks for blood. If there is any present, she swabs it, wearing gloves and a mask to avoid contamination. She then swabs around the edges of the blood sample, and takes a control swab, using just water.

“It's important to be thorough,” says Nicola. “You only get one shot at a crime scene so you need to capture everything, labelling it carefully, as the case may not get to court for a year or more.”

Each piece of evidence is called an exhibit. As she collects them, Nicola also writes notes on what she sees. What seems to be blood mustn't be called blood in her notes. Prior to analysis, this is only 'apparent' or 'possible' blood.

ONE INVESTIGATOR

“It’s the same with prints – if they are referred to as fingerprints in my notes and one later turns out to be a thumbprint, this may cause difficulties in court. We have to be very careful.”

Prints are lifted next, using a variety of powders, depending on the surface. If a print emerges, Nicola tries to enhance it, using her brush to work round the edges to reveal more. Depending on the type of surface this is then lifted using tape or gel.

Then come footwear marks, and any other evidence that Nicola finds, such as prints on items that the intruder seems to have handled, or even DNA from a bottle of milk – as some will stop to take a drink!

11.00 – it’s off to the next crime scene, which could be another burglary, a car crime, or an act of violence.

14.00 – during the afternoon, if there are no more scenes to attend, Nicola usually takes care of her paperwork, downloading her notes on the main system. She also files evidence collected during the morning. DNA is frozen, ready to go to the Forensic Science Service for analysis. Camera files go to the photo lab for processing.

“There’s always something to do, whether I’m following up on a case, writing a statement for court, or dealing with an enquiry from a Police Officer.”

15.00 – another common task for a CSI is photographing victims of violence. Nicola might go to a person’s home, or go to see them in hospital. If they are well enough, they come into the office and have their photos taken in the special photographic studio.

16.00 – Nicola returns home for a well-deserved rest before the next hectic shift. So does she have any final words to say about her job?

“I think it’s important to note that we are impartial in all that we do. We’re not here to prove guilt or otherwise. A CSI’s job is to collect evidence and build up a factual picture of what happened.”

If you would like your job to be featured as part of this series, contact Samantha Walker on samantha.walker@skillsforjustice.com or **0114 231 7387**.



Each member of the team has their own van, which they are responsible for keeping well-stocked and maintained. They go out alone, but stay in close contact with the control room by radio.

A CSI’s van houses a multitude of tools and equipment, including:

- **Print toolkit with brushes, powders, tape, swabs, bags etc**
- **Camera (digital and Polaroid)**
- **Plaster material to cast foot marks etc**
- **Bags for large items such as mattresses**
- **Tools such as spades and forks**
- **Protective clothing, waterproofs**
- **Crime scene ‘do not cross’ tape**