



SCENE PHOTOGRAPHY



Scene photographs can be essential for a medical examiner when determining cause and manner of death. Photographs should emphasize the relationship of the decedent to the scene, record physical evidence as it is first encountered, and document any other objects or evidence that may be pertinent in the investigation process. A few purposeful photographs can go a long way.

Photographs to Consider at Every Scene:

- **Big picture:** Wide-angle photographs depicting the general scene and relationships between the decedent and various pieces of evidence. Depending on the type of scene, this can be accomplished in one or a few photos.
- **Mid-range:** Photographs showing the position of the body and greater detail pertaining to the body's relationship with relevant evidence at the scene. If the decedent is found lying on top of any objects, a photograph of the area where the decedent was located after they have been moved is helpful in interpreting any potential artifact seen at autopsy.
- **Close-up:** Detailed photographs emphasizing important pieces of evidence at a scene, such as a firearm, drug paraphernalia, or suicide note. Close-up photographs of the body are not essential – this is the one piece of evidence that the Medical Examiner's office will always have – unless the photographs contain evidence that might be distorted during transportation, such as livor mortis pattern or the presence of soot or gunpowder on the body or clothing.

Certain scenes call for specific photographs that may be not applicable in other situations.

Examples of Case-Specific Photographs:

Hangings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">□ Wide-angle of suspended body.□ Attachment point of ligature.□ Proximity of feet to the ground.□ Objects used to assist in suspension.□ Suicide note (if present).
Motor Vehicle Crashes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">□ Condition and position of the vehicle in its environment.□ Position of body in the vehicle.
Babies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">□ Face and body <i>as soon as possible</i> to document lividity.□ Bedding associated with the sleeping environment.
Firearm-Related Fatalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">□ Relationship between decedent and firearm.□ Close-up of weapon.
Falls	<ul style="list-style-type: none">□ Height of fall.□ Position of body after landing.□ Any objects that may have come in contact with the decedent during the fall.



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Frequently Asked Questions:

What if the body or evidence has been moved?

Photographs of the body or evidence should be obtained even if they have been moved. If evidence has been moved prior to photography, it should be noted in your investigation narrative. The body or other evidence should never be reintroduced into the scene in order to take photographs. In these cases, the body or evidence (e.g. a weapon secured by law enforcement or a ligature removed by family) can be photographed separately.

What if I don't have a fancy camera?

Scene photographs do not need expensive photography equipment to be useful. A simple "point-and-shoot" camera is more than enough to capture quality photographs of a scene.

Can I use my cell phone to take pictures?

We highly discourage taking photographs with your cell phone. Those pictures you take are considered evidence and are discoverable at any moment. If the photographs are on your phone, you run the risk of it being confiscated in an investigation or litigation process.

Do I need to have a ruler in every photograph?

Rulers can be helpful with close-up photographs, especially if they are of a weapon, but are not required. If a ruler or some sort of scale is used, make sure it is in the same plane as the object of interest.

Where do I send my photographs?

Photographs can be emailed to iosme.mel@idph.iowa.gov via Virtru.