

Law Enforcement Photography

Photography, in the law enforcement field, is a diversified subject. Perhaps the best way to describe what is needed is to break the field into three groups (lab technicians, crime scene specialists, and forensic photographers), and explain seven top questions:

- Who uses law enforcement photographers?
- What is the difference between the three types of photographers?
- What would a job description look like for this position?
- Where do you learn crime scene photography?
- What else do you have to do?
- What about Federal jobs?

The following information is based on average responses to questionnaires returned by various law enforcement agencies. These requirements may differ from agency to agency.

Who Uses Law Enforcement Photographers?

Small town and Sheriff's departments - A local photographer usually supports small-town police and Sheriff's departments for any major crime scenes. He or she is usually a professional photographer living in the area. They are called when needed and paid a small fee to cover the costs of materials plus an hourly rate for their time. The individual law enforcement officer usually carries a camera with him in his patrol car to photograph minor accidents or crime scenes. These photographs are usually processed by the local one-hour lab or by sending them to a photofinishing plant in the area. The hiring of a full-time photographer is rare due to budget limitations.

Medium-size police departments (populations under 100,000 residents) - Via report data, the following appears true for most of the departments questioned. Detectives are trained on how to use a camera (usually a point-and-shoot model). Generally they have no training on exposure, selective focus, close-up or any other type of specialized photography...unless an in-house class is given by a larger law enforcement agency. These departments usually have their photographs processed and printed by a local one-hour or sent to a local photofinishing lab. Once again, budget limitations do not allow for the hiring of a full-time Crime Scene Photographer. The detective is expected to be knowledgeable in evidence gathering, fingerprint lifting, blood splatters, and many other specialties. Opportunities are limited but a photographer with the necessary photographic skills has a chance to be hired "on call" for any major crime scene work. If you are hired, police officers would train you in these areas: the proper procedures of evidence handling, the rules of evidence, and chain of custody procedures. Such knowledge is of utmost importance should the case go to trial.

Persistence and a portfolio will help you get your foot in the door. Compile your best work, subjects that are representative of work that would be of interest to the police department. They are not interested in looking at landscapes, portraits or "artsy-crafty" photographs. Attempt to photograph accidents—real or simulated—battered women and children (these **should** be simulated), etc. Stage a crime scene and photograph it. Arson or an old fire scene is another excellent subject. Do close-up work, include a scale (ruler) in your work, and print it or have it printed one to one (1:1). Produce the best photographs you can, and edit them down to show the best of the best.

Large-city police department (populations over 100,000 residents) - This is the best market in which to apply for a position in photography. Most police departments in cities of this size have different positions related to photography. Non-sworn personnel hold most of these positions. Openings may be for Lab Technicians, Crime Scene Specialists (CSS), Forensic Photographers, or Police Aides (PA). PAs are non-sworn people hired to assist police officers with paperwork and shuttle cars from one station to another. A PA will also do some minor law enforcement work, such as directing traffic at accident scenes and assisting officers at accidents. They are also trained to assist in family disputes. The job description could be large and challenging.

Working as a PA may be a good way to get your start in Law Enforcement. From there you may be able to advance into the Crime Scene Specialist (CSS) program. Usually, a CSS is chosen from the PA ranks. Only those who express a desire to get involved with crime scene work would be considered. Your best source of employment information in large cities is their Human Resources department. Ask for job descriptions with photographic work.

State and Federal Governments - Experienced photographers with good photographic knowledge usually fill state and federal positions. This does not eliminate your chances with an agency if you are an experienced photographer or have a good working knowledge of various camera formats, film types and darkroom techniques. Check with their Human Resources for job descriptions and openings.

What is the difference between a Lab Technician, Crime Scene Specialist and a Forensic Photographer?

A Lab Technician is the darkroom expert. They are responsible for all film development, both black & white and color. They also produce black & white and color enlargements, as well as 1:1. In addition, they are responsible for all copy work and the logging and filing of all negatives.

A Crime Scene Specialist (CSS) is trained in a variety of subjects, including photography. Their mission is to cover all crime scenes by photographing it, gathering and packaging evidence, dusting and lifting of fingerprints, making measurements, and drawing the crime scene to scale. A CSS is also required to photograph bodies at the scene and at autopsies. They are non-sworn and are not required to carry a firearm.

A Forensic Photographer is an expert in the photosciences field. He has knowledge beyond the basics of exposure and film development. He is rarely called to a crime scene unless special photography is required, such as ultraviolet or Luminol photography.

Job Descriptions

The following are job descriptions for the three mentioned positions in law enforcement. These are average descriptions used by police departments in cities of over 100,000. This description may not be the same for other cities or states, but they will be similar.

POLICE LABORATORY TECHNICIAN

Vision:

Performs highly skilled professional-level work involving the application of general, forensic, and medical/legal photographic techniques and methodologies

Essential Functions:

- Mixes color and black & white chemistry, accurately measuring chemicals and making solutions using simple mathematics and the principles of chemistry
- Processes, develops, and prints color and black & white negative and positive films using proper procedures and operating automatic or manual equipment
- Uses large, medium, and small-format cameras and films to copy or photograph items
- Manually loads and processes film to produce quality and/or custom photograph prints
- Cleans equipment and assists or performs the daily and weekly laboratory clean up
- Assists the Forensic Photographer in teaching photographic classes
- Interacts with co-workers and the general public
- Performs inventory counts of supplies used by the photographic laboratory. Assists and performs
- Assists in the semi and annual periodic maintenance of all processing and printing equipment
- Performs minor repairs on equipment; changes water and air filters as needed

- Complete forms and maintains detailed records
- Knows and follows the rules of evidence and chain of custody procedures and all other requirements outlined in the General Orders and Crime Lab procedures.

Qualifications:

This position requires a high school diplomas or G.E.D, one year experience in a comparable law enforcement agency or industrial photographic employment, and demonstrable skills in general photography and darkroom techniques. Needs the ability to communicate orally with co-workers, department personal and general public in person and over the phone; install, replace or adjust filters, light bulbs, etc.; follow rules and evidence procedures as required; coordinate visual and muscular dexterity; to operate a camera, mix chemicals, process film and produce quality prints, work in a darkroom setting, clean equipment and perform minor equipment repairs and maintenance, and prepare and sort materials in a prescribed manner; perform physical inventories; complete forms, make basic mathematical calculations, and comprehend and make inferences from written materials. Must be able to make precise, skilled, and controlled arm-hand movements; bend and stoop to obtain photographs and equipment; lift arms above shoulder, lift 30 pounds above shoulder level; mix and work with a variety of chemicals; operate a computer terminal using hand-eye coordination. Must possess valid driver's license with no major driving citations within the past 39 months. Attendance and punctuality are essential to this position.

POLICE CRIME SCENE SPECIALIST (CSS)

Vision:

Collects, examines, preserves, photographs, and investigates all types of crime scenes. Prepares detailed reports and measures and diagrams those crime scenes. Works closely with police detectives, officers, and the general public.

Essential Functions:

- Visually and physically examines and investigates all types of crime scenes for the recognition, collection and preservation of physical evidence, such as body fluids, hair and fibers, weapons, and other materials in sometimes stressful and unpleasant environments.
- Measures and diagrams crime scenes; makes mathematical calculations; prepares field and scale diagrams.
- Prepares and utilizes various chemicals, powders and compounds used in a photographic and forensic laboratory, as well as body fluids.
- Photographs crime scenes and evidence as well as postmortem examinations; dusts for and completes lifts for fingerprints; casts shoe impressions and other evidence preserving techniques as required.
- Prepares detailed crime scene reports both handwritten and by using a computer terminal.
- Conducts interviews in person and over the phone with victims, detectives, and the public to gain relevant information. May be required to testify in court.
- Assists at traffic accident scenes; directs traffic standing for extended periods in all kinds of weather conditions while moving hands and arms above the shoulders; bends, stoops, climbs, or picks up traffic cones and other objects.
- Wears a uniform and patrols the city operating a police motor vehicle.
- Uses MDT, two-way radio, and computer.

Qualifications:

Requires a high school diploma with college coursework in chemistry, criminal justice, or a related field and one year experience working in a police environment. Must be able to pass a timed Physical Agility Test. Requires excellent public contact skills. Required to wear a uniform, work rotating shifts including nights, weekends and holidays, and be on call when required; work with and be exposed to hazardous materials and firearms; sit or stand for extended periods of time. Needs the ability to operate a variety of standard office equipment including a computer, MDT and two-way radio; produce detailed written reports; perform basic mathematical calculations, measure distances and draw diagrams; learn job-related tasks and skills through oral and written instruction and on-the-job training. Must be able to work

in all weather conditions; bend, stoop, and lift objects to perform job tasks; produce clear and concise vocal and written communications; perceive the full range of the color spectrum. Must have a valid drivers license. Must be able to team and appropriately use city ordinances, department policies and procedures, statutes and ordinances; read maps and demonstrate knowledge of the city's geography. Must be able to move or drag up to 165 lbs., and carry up to 50lbs. without assistance; use visual and muscular dexterity to operate a motor vehicle and various crime scene tools; exercise independent judgment and recognize emergency and hazardous situations. Attendance and punctuality are essential to this position.

POLICE FORENSIC PHOTOGRAPHER

Vision:

Performs highly skilled professional-level work, involving the application of general, forensic and medical/legal photographic techniques and methodologies.

Essential Functions:

- Serves as the principal police department photographer and laboratory technician.
- Utilizes conventional and unconventional techniques, photographs a variety of subjects, such as latent prints, tool-marks, fracture matches, documents and administrative photos. Provides various photographic and photographic laboratory services, encompassing color and black & white (positive & negative).
- Operates a camera, mixes chemicals, processes film and produces quality and/or custom photographic prints using skilled and controlled arm-hand movements.
- Cleans equipment using various chemicals.
- Works in a dark room to process photographs.
- Provides various photographic services associated with a police crime laboratory and police department.
- Assists with the photographic budget and inventories/orders supplies; completes forms and maintains detailed records.
- Instructs police personnel on the use of photographic equipment in one-on-one and classroom settings
- Checks the work of others to ensure quality and conformance to standards.
- Occasionally responds to crime scenes and postmortem examinations for photographic assignments.
- Maintains, cleans, services photographic equipment; changes light bulbs, loads film, etc. Determines the need for replacement or purchase of new photographic equipment.

Qualifications:

Requires a high school diploma or G.E.D. with college courses in photography preferred. Minimum of two years experience in a comparable law enforcement agency or industrial photographic employment. Must possess demonstrable skills in general photography, forensic and medical/legal photography, and photography laboratory techniques and methodologies. Needs the ability to work stand-by, call-outs, and overtime; and operate a motor vehicle (requiring a valid driver's license with no major driving citations in the last 39 months). Must communicate orally with co-workers and the general public in person and over the phone; instruct others in a classroom setting; measure distances using calibrated instruments; install, replace or adjust filters, light bulbs, etc. Needs the ability to prepare and sort materials in a prescribed manner; perform physical inventories; and comprehend and make inferences from written materials. Must be able to make precise, skilled and controlled arm-hand movements; bend and stoop to obtain photographs; lift arms above shoulder level; operate a variety of standard office equipment; clean equipment; mix and work with a variety of chemicals; review work of others to ensure conformance to standards. Attendance and punctuality are essential to this position.

Where do I learn crime scene photography?

First and foremost you must be a capable photographer. You must be knowledgeable of different camera formats, film types, basic lighting and flash photography. It is also advisable to have a good working knowledge of different film types, both black & white and color. Infrared and ultraviolet would also be helpful but not required.

There may be other universities across the country that teach subjects in Criminal Justice, just not full courses. In addition to the schools listed above, many community colleges also teach courses in Criminal Justice. Some helpful subjects would be: Law Enforcement Operations, Criminology, Forensic Science, and Crime and Accident Photography.

Membership in professional organizations is another place to obtain legal photography from those who have been doing this type of work for years. There is a vast storehouse of knowledge in organizations, and members are always willing to share their experiences with others. EPIC holds an annual Evidence School where experts lecture on current techniques. In addition, the hands-on events and workshops allow attendees to obtain valuable information and experience. EPIC also produces valuable resources packed with great information for evidence photographers.

What else do I have to do?

You must be able to respond to “call-outs” any time—day, night, or weekends. But you do have free time because call-outs are usually shared by two or more people. And you will not have to carry a firearm because you would be a non-sworn employee (meaning you are not authorized to carry a firearm). If you are in a situation deemed dangerous, a uniformed officer or detective will be with you.

If you love a challenge and like to investigate both large and small crimes, then this job is for you. You could excel at this job if you can photograph items under various conditions, including rain, wind and snow. If you can photograph and obtain excellent results the first time, this job is for you. Remember that you only have one chance to produce your photographs. When a body or other item has been removed, it is too late for a “retake.” Your missing photograph could possibly lose a case...and with it, your creditability. You would likely testify in court about your photographs, why you used the exposure that you did and why you chose that exposure over another.

How about the Federal jobs like the FBI, ATF, DEA or INS?

Generally, photographers that are hired by these agencies have had years of photographic experience with law enforcement agencies or other such agencies, like scientific labs or areas where expertise in the photographic sciences is required. Time and experience will allow you to apply for a position with the Federal Government. All Government positions are posted and are open to anyone who can qualify.

Conclusion

It may take a lot of knowledge and a little bit of luck to get your foot in the door, but once there you will belong to an elite group of photographers. Don't become discouraged if your first attempts at applying are turned down. Try harder and reapply. Your efforts will reap big rewards, if you are good enough.