

CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATION IN TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

A Law Enforcement Resource Toolkit — National Native Justice Institute | www.nativejustice.us

■ CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATION IN INDIAN COUNTRY

Crime scene investigation (CSI) in Indian Country presents unique challenges including remote locations, limited forensic resources, multi-agency jurisdictional coordination, and weather-sensitive evidence conditions. Tribal officers are often the first — and sometimes only — responders at the scene. The quality of evidence collected in the first hours determines the outcome of prosecution.

🔍 First responding tribal officers preserve more cases than any forensic laboratory — scene security and documentation decisions made in the first minutes are irreversible.

⚠️ Evidence contamination, improper packaging, or chain of custody failures are leading causes of case dismissal in Indian Country.

📱 Digital evidence — phones, surveillance, social media — is now central to most serious investigations and must be secured immediately.

👮 In Major Crimes Act cases, notify the FBI/BIA immediately and preserve the scene intact pending their arrival.

■ CORE CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATION PROTOCOL

Scene Security & Documentation

- Establish an inner and outer perimeter immediately. Only essential personnel enter the inner perimeter.
- Document your arrival time, observations upon arrival, and all personnel who enter the scene in your report.
- Photograph the scene before touching or moving anything. Begin wide-angle overview shots and proceed to mid-range and close-up documentation.
- Create a written crime scene sketch with measurements, compass orientation, and fixed reference points.

Evidence Collection Standards

- Collect and package physical evidence in appropriate containers (paper bags for biological evidence, sealed plastic for other items).
- Label every item with case number, date, time, location found, and collecting officer's name before packaging.
- Maintain chain of custody documentation for every item from collection through court. Every transfer must be documented.
- Use gloves, masks, and appropriate PPE for biological evidence. Change gloves between items to prevent cross-contamination.

Digital & Electronic Evidence

- Do not touch, charge, or attempt to unlock any electronic device found at a crime scene. Document its position and power state.
- Request a search warrant for cell phones and electronic devices before attempting access — unauthorized access can exclude evidence.
- Document all surveillance camera locations in the area and submit preservation requests to businesses within 24 hours — footage is often overwritten quickly.

■ TIPS FOR TRIBAL CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATORS

- **Slow Down and Assess First** – Walk through the scene before touching anything. Develop a mental plan for documentation and collection before you begin.
- **Always Work from Outer to Inner** – Process the perimeter before the focal point. Retreating footprints and secondary evidence are often found in overlooked outer areas.
- **Document Negative Evidence** – Note and photograph what is absent as well as present. Missing items — a phone, shoes, wallet — may be critical to the investigation.
- **Notify FBI for Major Crimes** – For federal offenses, notify immediately, document that notification, and preserve the scene as completely as possible pending their arrival.
- **Request Forensic Support Early** – BIA, FBI, and state crime labs may provide mobile forensic support for serious crimes. Request assistance early — do not wait until evidence is collected.
- **Complete Chain of Custody Every Time** – No exceptions, no informal handoffs. Every transfer of evidence must be documented. One gap can destroy a prosecution.

RESOURCES, GRANTS & SUPPORT

Funding, Training, and Support Resources — Tribal Crime Scene Investigation Programs | www.nativejustice.us

■ FEDERAL GRANT RESOURCES

Forensic & Investigation Support

- **FBI Evidence Response Teams (ERT)** – FBI can provide forensic support to tribal law enforcement for serious crimes. fbi.gov
- **BIA Office of Justice Services** – Provides investigative support and forensic coordination for tribal law enforcement. bia.gov/bia/ojs
- **NIJ Tribal Crime & Forensics Programs** – Research, training, and technology resources for tribal law enforcement. nij.ojp.gov

Law Enforcement Capacity

- **COPS Tribal Resources Grant (TRG)** – Funds equipment, training, and staffing for tribal law enforcement including forensic tools. cops.usdoj.gov
- **CTAS – Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation** – DOJ consolidated tribal funding for law enforcement and investigation capacity. justice.gov/tribal
- **BJA Tribal Justice Programs** – Supports tribal law enforcement capacity building including investigation training. bja.ojp.gov

■ STATE & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **State Homeland Security Grants (SHSGP)** – Tribal law enforcement may be eligible for state-administered FEMA homeland security funding.
- **Tribal Law & Order Act (TLOA) Resources** – Expanded tribal criminal authority and DOJ technical assistance for implementation.
- **Grants.gov Tribal Search Tool** – Search all federal grants available to tribal entities. grants.gov (filter: Tribal Government eligibility)

■ HELPFUL TIPS FOR TRIBAL PROGRAMS & LEADERS

Equip Every Officer with Basic CSI Tools Every patrol officer should carry: camera, gloves, paper bags, evidence tape, permanent markers, and a scene sketching kit.	Establish a CSI Training Program Regular crime scene training — including hands-on scenario exercises — is the single greatest investment in prosecution success.
Pre-Establish FBI & Lab Relationships Know your FBI evidence technician contact and state crime lab liaison before a major crime occurs.	Audit Chain of Custody Procedures Annually Review your evidence handling, storage, and transfer procedures every year. Chain of custody weaknesses are best found in review, not court.

■ KEY WEBLINKS

National Native Justice Institute	www.nativejustice.us
BJA Tribal Justice Programs	bja.ojp.gov/program/tribal-justice
COPS Tribal Resources	cops.usdoj.gov/tribalresources
BIA Law Enforcement Services	bia.gov/bia/ojs
NIJ Tribal Crime Research	nij.ojp.gov
CTAS – DOJ Tribal Assistance	justice.gov/tribal
Grants.gov (Tribal Search)	grants.gov

■ PARTNER WITH NNJI — WE ARE READY TO SUPPORT YOUR COMMUNITY

TAKE ACTION TODAY — Contact NNJI at www.nativejustice.us to schedule training, consultation, or access resources.

Strengthening Tribal Justice — One Community at a Time