

NEIGHBORHOOD INVESTIGATIONS

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Neighborhood investigations, directed toward the discovery of evidence or clues accidentally or intentionally left by an arsonist or other criminal offender, can make a critical difference in solving a case. Although neighborhood investigations are time consuming and tedious, particularly because multiple visits are almost always necessary to contact neighbors with differing schedules, the evidence and clues discovered might make or break your case.

Questions asked in a neighborhood investigation, whether in a residential or commercial area, must be carefully planned in advance. The information uncovered will be only as good as the question designed to elicit that information. For example, in one case study cited in an article on Neighborhood Investigation by Tim Huff of the FBI National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime ("NCAVC"), detectives had inquired from neighborhood residents whether on the night of an arson anyone had seen anything suspicious. Although none of the neighbors admitted having seen anything suspicious, one resident later told detectives that on the night of the fire she had seen the suspect hurry down the sidewalk across the street carrying a gasoline can, but did not regard it as "suspicious" because she assumed his car had run out of gas.

Although we all have our own ideas of what a successful neighborhood investigation should include, Mr. Huff's NCAVC article mentions some of the following, to which I have added my own ideas:

Be insightful and thorough in your approach. Plan key questions designed to elicit the information you want, without disclosing too much information and without asking leading questions.

Design your questions to elicit information regarding the witness's sense of sight, smell, hearing, or in some cases, rumor, intuition or hunch.

Enhance the witness's memory by describing environmental or weather conditions at the time in question, such as lighting conditions, rainy or clear weather, foggy or smoky atmosphere, lightning, etc.

Establish timeframes by reference to daily events or activities which the witness might recall, such as television programs, leaving or returning from work or school, meals, leisure activities, meetings, church, etc.

Draw a map of the area to record the proximity of each witness's home or place of observation in relation to the person or thing observed, indicating distance and the

witness's line of sight, etc., to corroborate the witness's ability to see, hear, etc., the evidence in question.

Where several investigators are canvassing an area, make sure that each one asks consistent questions designed to elicit the same type of information, so that the search will be more uniformly conducted, more thorough and reliable, and unbiased.

Design questions to encourage the witness to disclose even information which the witness might regard as trivial, such as a description of sights, sounds or an infinite variety of other factors which may not seem significant to the average person. For example, although most people would consider the model or color of a vehicle important in its identification, something less obvious such as a description of a bumper sticker might be just as important in identifying the vehicle. The fact that a barking dog may, or may not, be heard might also be significant to an investigator, but not to your average neighborhood witness.

For persons who are not home during the canvass, ask other neighbors who lives there, where they work or go to school, what time they usually leave and return, and how they can be reached at different times during the day or night. Be sure to follow up by contacting previously absent neighbors at a later time, since overlooked neighbors may have very important evidence or leads to other information.

Be sure to inquire if any neighbors videotaped or photographed the event, including photographs of any persons present or watching the event. Fires fascinate people, and photographs of the fire or scene may later be invaluable to establish the color of smoke, location and height of flames, potential suspects, etc.

Make sure to interview persons who make daily or weekly deliveries or rounds in the area, such as newspaper or mail delivery persons, school and public bus drivers and regular passengers, express mail delivery persons, construction workers, telephone or utility servicemen, commuters, regular joggers and walkers, crossing guards, policemen and area security guards, lawn maintenance workers, pizza delivery persons, and any other people regularly present in an area.

Although neighborhood investigations are more time consuming than making telephone calls, the importance of face-to-face interviews cannot be underestimated. Given the investigator's ability to follow up on hunches and clues obtained from a variety of neighbors, the reward of a well-planned and thorough neighborhood investigation can often make the difference in obtaining the evidence you need.