Dispelling the Myths of TV Crime Scenes

Television shows that focus on crime scene investigators have proven so popular in recent years that they’ve created a profitable niche for several major networks. But these wildly successful shows might also have caused unintentional spillovers that some fear is proving detrimental to real life law and order.

In many cases, the television programs are far removed from the reality that actual crime scene investigators face, says Laura Pettler, a forensics instructor with the online division of South University.

“They find forensic evidence so frequently that it creates an image for the public that this is normal — that we find DNA and fingerprints on everything, and we don’t,” says Pettler, who is also director of crime scene reconstruction and behavioral analysis for a three-county district in North Carolina.

The television shows can misinform about forensics and the type and quality of evidence available to prosecutors, experts say. Plus, prospective crime scene investigators enter the field of forensics expecting their jobs will be just like the glamorous visions they see on the tube.

Last year, a crime scene investigator with the Montgomery Police Department visited students in the Criminalistics class at South University — Montgomery to discuss how the real work of investigators compares with what’s presented on television.

The TV plots are pretty true to life in one respect — the investigation starts with the discovery of a dead body. But the truth devolves from there. First, the crack team of investigators deals with pristine evidence found at the crime scene. Next, evidence is processed in the commercial breaks while the crime scene investigators — not detectives — pursue their leads. Finally, the whole investigation usually wraps up in about an hour.

The whole thing is very unlike what real crime scene investigators face in their jobs. Pettler says that in a best-case-scenario crime scene, it takes up to ten hours to collect evidence, and lab processing can take up to a month. That timeline assumes, of course, that the lab isn’t understaffed or unavailable altogether.

Could the impact of the TV shows also extend to the jury box? Some prosecutors and others in law enforcement think so, suggesting the programs have had an impact on decisions made in courtrooms across the country.

In a 2004 rape trial in Illinois, for example, a jury was presented with DNA evidence linking the defendant to the victim, along with strong testimony from the victim, an ER nurse, and officers involved in the investigation. But the jury found the defendant not guilty because no one ran a test to see if material found in the victim matched soil from the park where the crime had taken place, according to a 2005 article in U.S. News. The prosecutor blamed the jury verdict on television shows that influenced jurors' views on what evidence should have been collected, the magazine reported.

Pettler recounted an instance from her own work as an investigator where the jury wanted DNA evidence in a property case — a pretty unrealistic expectation, she says.

But not everyone is convinced. Kimberlianne Podlas, an assistant professor of Media Law at University of North Carolina, Greensboro, wrote in a 2006 law journal that claims about cases such as the one in Illinois are "not grounded in case-studies or statistical data of increases in acquittals. Rather, they are based on anecdotes about cases wherein law enforcement lost their case while believing it should have won."

Published in the Loyola of Los Angeles Entertainment Law Review, the article by Podlas suggests that there isn't enough evidence to prove a crime scene television show "instills in its viewers unreasonable expectations about the commonality of forensic evidence and teaches them that proof of guilt is just a simple forensic test away."

Even so, experts agree that the shows seem to have contributed to some unreasonable expectations in students about what crime scene jobs are like.
Unlike on TV, there is no room for a crime scene investigator to debate with superiors in the real world, Pettler says. As a branch of law enforcement, crime scene investigators fall into a very hierarchical structure; someone entering the field has to be willing and able to follow orders swiftly and effectively, she points out. The work of the investigator can be relatively thankless, Pettler says. It requires exceptional organization skills and an ability to follow directions to the letter — not necessarily the stuff of TV dramas.

To Pettler, the creed of crime scene investigators boils down to three words: "Identify, Collect, Preserve."