

Sudden Infant Death Scene Investigation Syllabus

16 TCOLE credits

Instructor information

Instructors

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General information

Description

Sudden unexpected infant deaths are among the most emotionally charged and technically challenging scenes that investigators, law enforcement officers, and medicolegal professionals encounter. This 2-day intensive training provides a comprehensive, evidence-informed framework for **investigating infant sleep-related deaths**, from first arrival on scene to communication with the medical examiner and support for bereaved families.

Through lectures, practical demonstrations, case reviews, a dedicated session led by a **SIDS parent-investigator (Deputy Chief Investigator Butler)**, and realistic mock scenes, participants will learn to collect high-quality scene data, conduct sensitive yet thorough interviews with caregivers, and understand how their work directly contributes to **public health, epidemiologic research, and prevention of future deaths**.

This course is designed for **law enforcement officers and medical examiner/coroner investigators** involved in infant death investigations. It may also be helpful for child fatality review team members, forensic professionals, and allied health professionals involved in investigations.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, participants will be able to:

1. **Define** infant sleep-related death and **summarize extrinsic risk factors** associated with SIDS, SUID, and SUDC.
2. **Demonstrate competency** in each step of an infant death scene investigation, including scene documentation, evidence collection, and caregiver interviews.
3. **Illustrate and communicate** the purpose and importance of death scene investigation to bereaved parents in a way that is compassionate, trauma-informed, and transparent.
4. **Apply parent-centered best practices** across all aspects of the investigation, including scene management, interviews, reenactments, and follow-up communication.
5. **Recognize and manage emotional impact** on investigators and teams when working infant death scenes.

Recommended Background

1. Basic experience with death scene investigation or patrol response
2. Familiarity with local reporting requirements and chain-of-command procedures

Course materials

Required materials

Participants Should Bring:

- Computer (we highly recommend a laptop for the pre- and post-test evaluations)
 - If a computer is not available, a smartphone can be used to complete the tests.

Provided by Course:

- Infant death scene investigation toolkit (for demonstration and practice, one per department):
 - Baby doll for reenactment
 - Evidence collection bag
 - Sample CDs, milk carton, and other scene items

- Materials to demonstrate mattress softness testing
- Printed or digital copy of the **standardized infant death scene investigation form**
- Course slides and reference materials (PDF)
- List of bereavement and community resources (including the Isabel Davis Center for Safe Children)

Optional materials

- Agency policies/procedures for reference (optional but recommended)

Course schedule

Day One - Foundations of Infant Death Investigation

Time	Session Title	Topics
08.00-08.25	Pre-Test & Background Survey (Dr. Lusk)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short pre-test to assess baseline knowledge of SIDS/SUID/SUDC
08.30-09.15	Session 1.1: Understanding SIDS, SUID, and SUDC (Dr. Lusk)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definitions: SIDS, SUID, SUDC and distinctions between them • Historical evolution of research and changing terminology • Why these deaths matter for public health and prevention • Purpose/goals of investigating infant sleep-related deaths • Current state of research and remaining unanswered questions
09.15-09.25	Break	
09.25-11.50	Session 1.2: Basics of Child Death Scene Investigation (Chief Investigator Danny Brewster)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Core principles of child death scene investigation • Tools and equipment needed on scene • Standard terminology and classification: natural vs non-natural deaths • What to document and how: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Photographs vs written documentation vs videography • Overview of investigative systems in Texas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Justice of the Peace vs Medical Examiner systems • Key legal statutes for child death investigations • Practical photography skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Camera settings • Angles, views, perspectives that best capture a safe and reviewable scene
12.00-13.00	Lunch	
13.10-15.50	Session 1.3: Investigation Form Deep-Dive (Dr. Lusk)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tools and prompts to help parents recall difficult details • In-depth review of each section of the standardized investigation form (~1,600 variables): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Rationale for each question

Time	Session Title	Topics
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Links to biological, epidemiological, and public health research ○ How to explain “why we’re asking this” to families
15.50-16.00	Break	
16.00-17.00	Optional Office Hours: Meet with the Presenters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open session for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Case-based questions ○ Policy discussions ○ Clarification of course concepts

Day Two - Integrating Medical Examiner Needs, Parent-Centered Practice, and Skills Application

Time	Session Title	Topics
08.00-09.00	Session 2.1: What the Medical Examiner Needs (Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Pustilnik)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What information from the death scene is most critical to the ME’s determination • Information that can be obtained from the body alone vs the environment • Common findings and conclusions in infant cases • “Red flags” that should trigger heightened attention or further investigation
09.00-10.30	Session 2.2: Applying Child Death Scene Investigation - From Scene to Data (Chief Investigator Danny Brewster)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical strategies for what to do at the scene: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Priorities on arrival ○ Coordinating with other responders • Evidence collection essentials: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Proper handling and documentation of bottles, milk residues, and other frequently overlooked items ○ Collection of mold samples when visible in the infant’s environment (walls, surfaces, common areas) • Comprehensive data collection: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Emphasizing full completion of the standardized form ○ Using the form as a “script” to guide the conversation and ensure completeness
10.30-12.00	Session 2.3: Interactive Case Reviews (Chief Investigator Danny Brewster)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of real infant death cases: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ A case that went well and why ○ A case with “room for improvement” and lessons learned • Group discussion focused on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What went right/wrong ○ How improved scene investigation could have changed the outcome or understanding • Translating lessons into participants’ own agencies
12.00-13.00	Lunch	
13.00-14.15	Session 2.4: Conversations with Bereaved Parents &	Drawing on her experience as both a child death investigator and a SIDS mother, Deputy Chief Investigator Butler will focus on:

Time	Session Title	Topics
	Managing Emotions (Deputy Chief Investigator Ashleigh Butler)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approaching parents who have just lost a child: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ First words and body language ○ Language to use—and to avoid—in the first minutes and hours • Balancing investigative needs with compassion: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Getting accurate information without causing additional harm ○ Setting expectations about what will happen next • Applying a parent-centered lens to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Scene management ○ Interviews and reenactments ○ Follow-up communication with families • Managing investigator emotions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Recognizing normal emotional responses to infant loss scenes ○ Strategies for grounding and debriefing after difficult calls ○ Building a team culture that acknowledges and supports emotional impact • Connecting families to support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ When and how to provide information on bereavement resources ○ Role of the Isabel Davis Center and similar organizations
14.15-14.30	Break	
14.30-16.00	Session 2.5: Mock Scenes, Doll Reenactments & Photo Documentation (Deputy Chief Investigator Ashleigh Butler)	<p>Participants rotate through realistic mock scenes designed to apply what they have learned:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practicing parent conversations using strategies from Session 2.4 • Conducting scene walk-throughs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Prioritizing safety, evidence preservation, and family-centered communication • Performing doll reenactments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Incorporating what Butler modeled about explaining the purpose and process ○ Using reenactments to clarify infant position, sleep environment, and last known alive details • Documenting the scene: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Photographing the environment, bedding, and relevant objects ○ Identifying medications, substances, and products present at the scene • Integrating the standardized form: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Using the form to make sure nothing important is missed <p>Short debriefs at each station reinforce key lessons while avoiding repetition of material already covered in Butler’s session.</p>

Time	Session Title	Topics
16.00-16.30	Course Evaluation & Closing (Dr. Lusk & Faculty)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completion of REDCap mini survey / feedback form • Optional verbal feedback to encourage participation and continuous improvement • Summary of key take-home messages • Certificates of completion / CE documentation (if applicable)

Additional information and resources

Assessment and Evaluation

This is a professional training workshop; assessment is formative and focused on skill development rather than graded performance.

- **Pre-test:** Baseline assessment of knowledge and perceptions
- **Informal knowledge checks:** During lectures and case reviews
- **Practical performance:** Observation of skills during mock scenes and reenactments
- **Post-course evaluation:**
 - Perceived competency changes
 - Course content, pacing, and relevance
 - Suggestions for improvement

Agencies may choose to incorporate attendance and participation into internal training records/CE credit systems.

Attendance and Participation Evaluation

Because skills are developed through **live practice**, participants are expected to:

- Attend **all scheduled sessions** on both days
- Actively participate in discussions and mock scenes
- Maintain professional demeanor, including respect for sensitive content and for fellow participants

If you anticipate missing any portion of the course, please notify the course director or your agency training coordinator in advance.

Professional Conduct, Confidentiality, and Psychological Safety

- **Confidentiality:**
 - Real cases may be discussed. Identifying details should **not** be shared outside the training environment.
 - Participants should not record sessions without explicit permission.
- **Content Warning:**
 - Course content includes discussions of infant death, grief, and potentially distressing scenes.
 - Participants are encouraged to step out briefly if they become overwhelmed and to rejoin when able.

Mental Health and Support Resources

Working repeated infant death scenes carries a significant emotional burden. The course will:

- Highlight strategies for **self-care and peer support** in investigative roles
- Encourage use of:
 - Agency mental health resources
 - Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)
 - Peer support teams

Participants are encouraged to speak with their supervisors or agency wellness contacts if they experience ongoing distress.

How to Succeed in this Course

- Come prepared to **engage**, ask questions, and share experiences from your own agency.
- Approach mock scenes as realistically as possible—this is where skills truly “stick.”
- Be open to **re-thinking** previous habits or assumptions about infant death scenes.
- Remember that the ultimate goal is:
 - **Understanding what happened to each baby,**
 - Supporting bereaved families, and
 - Improving data quality to prevent future deaths.