Lifting prints

One very special kind of pattern evidence has unique value to investigators. Fingerprints are the most personal of all patterns, and we leave them on almost everything we touch. They are formed by the whirling ridges on the skin of our hands. Everyone has a different pattern of ridges. The fingerprints criminals leave behind can prove where they have been, what they have done—and most important of all, who they are.



Investigators look very carefully for fingerprints. Sometimes they are obvious, but more often, villains do not make the detective's work easy. The prints that clean hands leave, even on glossy surfaces such as glass or metal, are hard to see unless the light shines from just the right angle. On rougher and patterned surfaces, such as paper, fingerprints may be completely invisible.

Latent prints

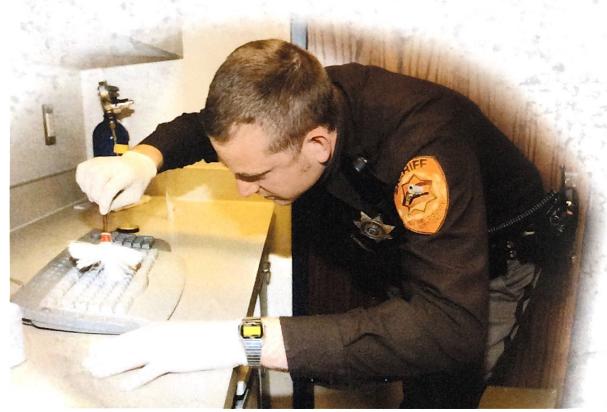
To find these hidden or 'latent' prints on glossy surfaces, SOCOs use dusting brushes to coat the surfaces criminals may have touched with very fine powder. The powder sticks to traces of grease and sweat that mark the fingerprints. To avoid smudging prints on very shiny surfaces, officers use powder mixed with iron dust, applying it with a magnetic brush that does not touch the surface.



▲ A roll of sticky tape is all it takes to lift prints from shiny objects at the crime scene. The glue holds prints firmly on an evidence card.

Recording the marks

The next step is to preserve the prints so they can be used as evidence. First, SOCOs take photographs of the prints. Then, if the object is small enough, they remove it to the crime lab, taking care not to disturb the prints. If the prints are on an object that cannot be moved, they lift them with special sticky tape. By sticking the tape to an evidence card, SOCOs ensure they can file it and find it again.



■ Detectives looking for fingerpri evidence start in the obvious place At home, nobody wears gloves to type, so this officer is dusting a computer keyboard.

