

Recovering Deleted CCTV And DVR Footage

CCTV and DVR systems automatically overwrite footage, creating an urgent need for preservation. This guide details how these systems store and delete data, the critical first steps for preservation, and methods for recovering deleted or overwritten footage, including considerations for authenticity and deployment in legal cases.

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CCTV & DVREVIDENCE · A GUIDE FOR UK LAWYERS Recovering Deleted CCTV and DVR Footage The Overwrite Clock, the Proprietary Recorder and the Race to Preserve the Frame
COMPUTER FORENSICS LAB

§ ABOUT THE AUTHOR PREPARED BY COMPUTER FORENSICS LAB E-DISCOVERY TEAM
PROPRIETARY-FORMAT DECODING CPR PART 35 EXPERT REPORT S FULL
CHAIN-OF-CUSTODY DOCUMENTATION

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§ HOW A SPECIALIST LABORATORY CAN ASSIST Working with Computer Forensics Lab
Speak to a forensic examiner, not a salesperson. INSTRUCT THE LAB
NEW ENQUIRIES EMAIL - DISCOVERY

Questions and answers

How long do we have before CCTV footage is gone?

Often days, some times only a few weeks, and occasionally less: retention is set by the disk size, the number of cameras and the recording settings, and busy multi-camera systems can hold as little as three or four days (§3, Example 1). The first step is always to find the retention period so the deadline is known, and then to preserve the footage before the loop reaches it. Assume the clock is short until proven otherwise.

Can we just film the CCTV monitor on a phone?

You can, but it is weak evidence and a poor substitute (§6, Example 3): a filmed screen is low quality, loses the metadata, and is easily challenged on timing and authenticity. The real evidence is the recorder's own native export with its metadata intact. Where the recorder still holds the footage, export it properly; the filmed monitor is a last resort for footage that no longer exists any other way.

Footage was deleted from the DVR. Can it be recovered?

Sometimes, if you act fast: user-deleted or not-yet-overwritten footage can be carved from the DVR's storage (§5, Example 2), and the recorder's log may record that the footage existed and who deleted it. But a running DVR keeps overwriting the residue, so the system must be taken out of service and imaged immediately. Footage the loop has already recorded over is genuinely gone.

The timestamp on the footage looks wrong. Does that matter?

It matters a great deal, and it is very common: DVR clocks are routinely set wrong, never adjusted for daylight saving, or drifted (§6). The recorder's clock is checked against a known reference to establish the offset, and the footage is then placed on the true timeline and reconciled with other sources like phone records or transaction logs (§7, Example 3). Never rely on the on-screen stamp without checking it.

The footage is dark or blurry. Can it be enhanced?

Within honest limits: lawful enhancement, brightness, contrast, stabilisation, can reveal detail that is present in the footage but hard to see, applied transparently and reversibly with the original kept (§6). What enhancement cannot do is invent resolution or detail the camera never captured: it reveals, it does not create. Any enhancement is documented and its limits stated, so the court knows what is real and what is interpretation.

The other side let the footage overwrite. Is there anything we can do?

Possibly: where they held relevant footage and let it overwrite after a preservation request, or failed to preserve it once the duty had arisen, the court may draw adverse inferences and impose spoliation consequences (§7), because CCTV loss is usually foreseeable and preventable. And the estate may still help, an overlapping camera, a cloud copy or an already-exported clip may hold the same event (§8). The overwrite of one recorder is not always the end. cflab. u k · e-discove r y. u k ©2026 Computer Forensics Lab Ltd ·cflab.uk ·e-discovery.uk ·info@cflab.uk ·+44 (0)20 7164 6915 Page 15 of 17

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