

Justice Department Turns to Psychological Science to Improve Eyewitness Identifications

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The US Department of Justice (DOJ) is bringing psychological science to bear on eyewitness identification procedures, outlining evidence-based guidelines in a [memorandum](#) issued earlier this month.

“Eyewitness identifications play an important role in our criminal justice system, both by helping officers and agents identify suspects during an investigation and by helping juries determine guilt at trial,” says Deputy Attorney General Sally Q. Yates. “It is therefore crucial that the procedures law enforcement officers follow in conducting those identifications ensure the accuracy and reliability of evidence elicited from eyewitnesses.”

Drawing on decades of scientific research, a team of experts—including prosecutors, law enforcement personnel, and psychological scientists—worked together to assess the state of the science and identify best practices in conducting eyewitness identifications.

The best practices recommendations set forth in the DOJ memo draw considerably on research

conducted by APS Fellow John T. Wixted (University of California, San Diego) and APS James McKeen Cattell Fellow Gary L. Wells (Iowa State University), including the [forthcoming *Psychological Science in the Public Interest \(PSPI\)*](#) that the two scientists have co-authored.

Among various recommendations, the memo highlights the importance of assessing eyewitness confidence at the time the eyewitness makes his or her initial identification. Referencing the *PSPI* report, the memo states that “new research finds that a witness’s confidence at the time of an initial identification is a reliable indicator of accuracy.”

As Wixted and Wells note in the *PSPI*, converging evidence indicates that when eyewitnesses make an initial identification with high confidence under specific, so-called “pristine,” conditions, confidence is a reliable indicator of accuracy. Even more importantly, when eyewitnesses express low confidence in their initial identification, that identification is prone to error, regardless of the conditions under which they made the identification.

A preprint of the *PSPI* report is now available [online](#) – the complete report, including accompanying commentaries, will be published online later this year.

As law enforcement and legal communities in the US increasingly draw on psychological science to inform certain procedures and guidelines, researchers are working to promote similar evidence-based practices in the United Kingdom. A recent [roundtable](#) organized by psychological scientist Laura B. Mickes (Royal Holloway, University of London) brought together researchers and practitioners to discuss how science-based practices can yield more reliable convictions and better outcomes for victims and eyewitnesses. Wixted presented findings from the *PSPI* at that event.