



E4 Issues in Eye Witness Identification From Composite Sketches to Photo Array Lineups

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the issues being raised nationwide regarding the reliability of eyewitness descriptions, identifications and photo array line-ups.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by defining the purpose behind using composite sketches and witness descriptions as investigative leads, and explaining the variables and limitations that exist when asking a witness or crime victim to describe the physical characteristics of an offender.

It is a common investigative practice to ask a victim or witness of a crime to describe the offender alleged to have committed that crime. Often these descriptions will result in either the generation of a composite sketch or with the victim or witness viewing a series of photographs in the form of what is commonly called a photo array or photo lineup. Eyewitness identifications are commonly used to support probable cause for arrest and as evidence against a defendant in trial; however, *erroneous* eyewitness identifications are commonly cited as reasons for false convictions. The variability by which eyewitness identifications are made increases the importance that investigators understand how to properly qualify the offender descriptions and identifications.

In any criminal case there is a commencement of an investigation, and an eventual trial in which evidence will be presented and an outcome will be determined. There are different stages involved in an investigation, and consequently, evidence and information will be obtained during that investigation that will amount to different levels of proof. In other words, certain investigative tools or techniques employed by investigators may not necessarily rise to the level of evidence required to demonstrate proof beyond a reasonable doubt; however these investigative tools may prove useful in generating information that allows for the investigation to proceed to the next level.

Composite sketches are a good example of an investigative tool. Composite sketches or artist's renderings are generated by a qualified artist and are based upon the descriptions of an offender as detailed by the victim or witness of a crime. The final drawing will be disseminated to the general public, in the hopes that information will be obtained regarding the unknown person responsible for the offense.

While composite sketches may prove to be a valuable investigative tool, they should remain just that; an investigative tool. The accuracy of the composite however, may prove quite useful in the investigation, therefore it is important that the rendering be as accurate as possible. To that end, the investigator taking the information must qualify the descriptions given by the victim or witness.

People perceive things differently, and consequently, descriptions of the same offender may differ as given by different witnesses. Techniques should be employed to ensure that the witness is accurately describing the offender, and can accurately identify that offender at a later time. Even in the case of a "positive identification" follow up investigative steps are necessary to ensure that the correct person is identified.

This presentation will discuss the role that composite sketches and photo arrays play in a criminal investigation as well as their respective limitations. Corroborative steps that can be taken to ensure that accurate details are obtained in order to verify the accuracy of eye witness identifications will also be detailed.

Eyewitness Identification, Photo Lineup, Investigations