

# Building trust with cooperative witnesses in a crime investigation

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Imagine that you witness a crime. The police investigator brings you to the police station to obtain an official statement, but between the crime and your official witness statement, you are exposed to other (potentially inaccurate) information about the crime. Before administering the criminal interview, the investigator asks you a litany of mundane demographic questions in a dry and uninterested manner, then moves directly into the interview about the crime. Would you feel comfortable? Most importantly, would your report be accurate and detailed, uninfluenced by the outside information you received?

According to major investigative interviewing protocols police investigators are expected to create a comfortable environment before interviewing adult witnesses to a [crime](#). Police often fail to spend time building rapport with adult witnesses before a criminal interview, possibly in an effort to save time. An article published in a forthcoming issue of [Applied Cognitive Psychology](#) shows that the additional time spent on building rapport (in particular using verbal techniques) may prevent inaccuracies in witness accounts and decrease the witness' susceptibility to post-event misinformation.

Lead author Dr. Jonathan P. Vallano, "When police interviewers build rapport by creating a comfortable environment with a witness, that witness is less likely to report false information than a witness that has not benefited from a comfortable environment. Our study, based on accounts from over 100 college-aged adults who viewed a videotaped mock theft crime, shows that building rapport before these adults were

asked to recall the mock crime decreased the percentage of inaccurate information reported by these witnesses."

Furthermore, the researchers found that rapport-building is most beneficial when witnesses are asked open-ended questions rather than specific, or cued questions related to the crime. Vallano, "We found that when the investigator shares something about his or herself with the witness, the person being interviewed is more likely to trust the interviewer and disclose a higher percentage of accurate information in return."

The findings suggest that investigators should place a stronger emphasis on rapport-building before interviewing cooperative adult witnesses. In addition, through this research, the legal field in general, including expert witnesses, will now have important information on how rapport-building (or the lack thereof) affects [witness](#) recall, which can be used when analysing the quality of investigative interviewing techniques.

**More information:** "A Comfortable Witness is a Good Witness: Rapport-Building and Susceptibility to Misinformation in an Investigative Mock-Crime Interview."; Jonathan P. Vallano, Ph.D & Nadja Schreiber Compo. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*.; Published Online: February 28, 2011 ([DOI: 10.1002/acp.1789](https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.1789)).

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