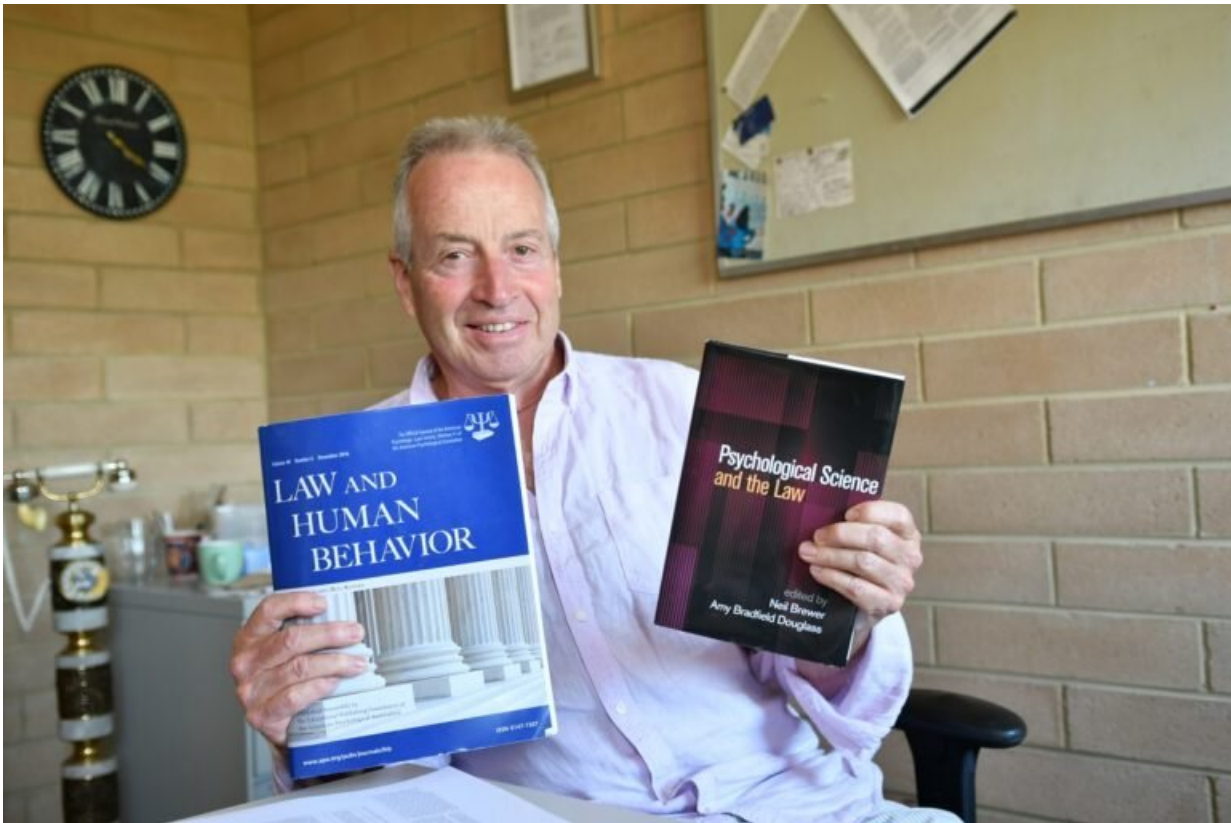


Questions loom over the future of police lineups

February 25 2020



Emeritus Professor Neil Brewer with the journal and his latest book. Credit: Flinders University

When eyewitnesses are called on to identify crime suspects, how likely are they to make mistakes? Should their seeing equate to believing?

Research shows that mistaken [eyewitness identification](#) has played a central role in more than 70% of the convictions of innocent people who were later exonerated by DNA testing.

Problems associated with eyewitness identification decisions have long been highlighted by memory researchers with overwhelming evidence that witnesses can err, sometimes with disastrous consequences.

Now, Flinders University's Emeritus Professor Neil Brewer and psychology colleagues have challenged whether police lineups as we know them should be retained when such a weight of evidence is shown to identify errors in the current identification systems.

This evidence is spelled out in the paper—"Police Lineups of the Future?", by Neil Brewer, Nathan Weber and Nicola Guerin—which has been published in the journal *American Psychologist*.

"We are advocating for a world in which the language of correct and mistaken identification disappears," says Emeritus Professor Brewer.

"Implementation of change would obviously be extremely difficult but reducing the likelihood of people being convicted of crimes they did not commit—or of criminals avoiding detection and conviction—are objectives that warrant translating the relevant psychological science into policy reform."

The problems with traditional identification tests are why the American Psychological Society's Psychology-Law division solicited recommendations on how police can best collect eyewitness evidence and address the problem of mistaken identifications.

Emeritus Professor Brewer was the only Australian invited to join five US psychologists to conduct the review, which has resulted in nine

evidence-based recommendations that have been published.

The review—"Policy and Procedure Recommendations for the Collection and Preservation of Eyewitness Identification Evidence," by social psychologists Gary Wells (Iowa State University), Margaret Bull Kovera and Amy Bradfield Douglass (Bates College), and cognitive psychologists Neil Brewer (Flinders University), Chris Meissner (Iowa State University) and John Wixted (University of California-San Diego) – has been published in the February 2020 issue of *Law and Human Behaviour*.

These recommendations include five new protocols:

- Advise law enforcement personnel to interview witnesses as soon as possible after a crime has been committed and record it on video.
- Ensure that police put in writing why a suspect is believed to be guilty of a specific crime before placing him or her in a lineup.
- Use a lineup with several people instead of what is known as a showup only featuring a single suspect.
- Avoid repetition of a lineup with the same suspect and same eyewitness.
- Record the entire process on video, from the instructions given to the witness before the lineup to the confidence statement from the witness after the lineup is complete.

Four other recommendations are modifications of existing protocols.

Emeritus Professor Brewer believes that upholding these recommendations would lead to significant improvements in eradicating mistaken identification within the criminal justice system. But, unfortunately, the [error rate](#) will still be unacceptably high—which underlines the importance of exploring radical new procedures such as

those evaluated in his *American Psychologist* paper.

More information: Neil Brewer et al. Police lineups of the future?, *American Psychologist* (2019). [DOI: 10.1037/amp0000465](https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000465)

Gary L. Wells et al. Policy and procedure recommendations for the collection and preservation of eyewitness identification evidence., *Law and Human Behavior* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/lhb0000359](https://doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000359)
www.apa.org/images/lhb-lhb0000359_tcm7-268630.pdf

Provided by Flinders University

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