

# LINEUP

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

October 26, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *LINEUP*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=61439>

## LINEUP

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Criminal Justice, Forensic Psychology, Law

### 1. Core Definition and Purpose

The term **lineup**, or **identification parade** in some jurisdictions, refers to a formal police procedure utilized in criminal investigations wherein a victim or eyewitness is asked to identify a known suspect from a group of individuals (known as **fillers** or foils) who are known to be innocent and share similar physical characteristics with the suspect. The fundamental purpose of the lineup is not simply to confirm an existing suspicion, but rather to test the reliability of the eyewitness's memory and provide definitive evidence linking the suspect to the crime scene, thereby moving the investigation toward prosecution or exoneration.

This procedure is a critical investigative tool, often depicted dramatically in popular culture, yet its execution carries profound legal and psychological ramifications. A successful, unbiased identification can significantly strengthen a prosecutor's case, while a failed or flawed procedure can lead to the suppression of evidence or, more critically, the misidentification and wrongful conviction of an innocent person. Consequently, modern legal standards and psychological research emphasize the necessity of rigorous, standardized protocols to minimize suggestive influences and maximize the accuracy of the identification process.

Historically, the lineup has served as a pivotal moment in the investigative process, acting as a bridge between the initial reporting of the crime and the formal charging of an individual. It operates on the presumption that if the witness's memory of the perpetrator is accurate, they should be able to pick the suspect out of a group designed to control for external bias. The individuals selected as fillers must be selected so as not to unduly single out the suspect, ensuring the witness is making a judgment based purely on memory rather than circumstantial distinctiveness.

### 2. Historical and Legal Context

While various forms of physical identification procedures have existed for centuries, the formal structure of the police lineup gained prominence in the mid-20th century as judicial systems began grappling with the admissibility of eyewitness testimony. In the United States, the legal requirements governing lineups were largely defined by a series of landmark Supreme Court cases in the 1960s. These decisions recognized the inherent dangers of suggestive identification procedures and the fundamental need to protect the accused's right to due process.

A key moment occurred with the 1967 trilogy of cases--*United States v. Wade*, *Gilbert v. California*, and *Stovall v. Denno*--which established a Sixth Amendment right to counsel during post-indictment physical lineups. Following this, the Supreme Court addressed the Due Process Clause

of the Fourteenth Amendment in cases like *Neil v. Biggers* (1972) and *Manson v. Brathwaite* (1977). These rulings established the framework for evaluating the admissibility of identifications based on five factors (often referred to as the *Biggers* factors): the opportunity of the witness to view the criminal, the witness's degree of attention, the accuracy of the witness's prior description of the criminal, the level of certainty demonstrated by the witness at the confrontation, and the length of time between the crime and the confrontation.

However, subsequent psychological research has cast significant doubt on the reliability of the *Biggers* factors, particularly the correlation between a witness's expressed confidence and the actual accuracy of their identification. This dissonance between legal precedent and scientific understanding has spurred substantial procedural reform efforts across various jurisdictions, moving away from purely retrospective judicial review and toward prospective administrative reforms designed to prevent unreliable identifications from occurring in the first place.

### 3. Types of Identification Procedures

Modern forensic psychology recognizes several methods for presenting suspects to witnesses, each carrying different psychological advantages and risks. The choice of procedure can significantly influence the accuracy and integrity of the resulting identification.

**Simultaneous Lineup:** This is the traditional procedure where the witness views all individuals (suspect and fillers) at the same time, either physically in a room or presented together in a photo array. Research suggests simultaneous presentation encourages a **relative judgment**--the witness compares the individuals to each other and selects the one who looks most like the perpetrator, which increases the likelihood of misidentification when the actual perpetrator is not present.

**Sequential Lineup:** In this method, the witness views the suspect and fillers one at a time, making a decision on each person before moving to the next. This procedure is generally favored by forensic psychologists because it encourages an **absolute judgment**--the witness must compare each person solely against their memory of the perpetrator, reducing the pressure to pick the "best fit" among the group.

**Photo Arrays (Six-Packs):** The most common form of lineup today, especially in initial investigative stages, involves presenting the witness with six to twelve photographs. Photo arrays are operationally easier to administer than physical lineups, but they require careful selection of photographs to ensure consistency in background, lighting, and size to avoid suggestive presentation.

**Showups:** A showup involves presenting a single suspect to the witness shortly after the commission of the crime, typically at the crime scene or nearby. While showups offer the advantage of immediate identification when the witness's memory is freshest, they are inherently suggestive because the witness knows the police believe this individual is the perpetrator.

Showups are generally permissible only under exigent circumstances or when conducted very close in time and location to the event.

#### 4. Psychological Factors Affecting Lineup Reliability (Eyewitness Testimony)

The reliability of a lineup identification is fundamentally dependent on the accuracy of **eyewitness memory**, which, unlike a video recording, is highly susceptible to distortion, decay, and suggestion. Psychological research categorizes the factors influencing eyewitness accuracy into two groups: estimator variables and system variables.

**Estimator Variables** are those aspects of the crime, the witness, or the environment that cannot be controlled by the justice system (e.g., viewing distance, lighting conditions, stress levels, presence of a weapon, or cross-race effects). For instance, the **weapon focus effect** demonstrates that when a weapon is present, a witness tends to focus attention on the weapon rather than the perpetrator's face, impairing later identification accuracy. Similarly, the **cross-race effect (CRE)** or own-race bias describes the tendency for people to be better at recognizing and distinguishing faces of their own race than faces of another race, significantly increasing the risk of misidentification in interracial crimes.

**System Variables** are those factors that are under the control of the justice system and the police investigator, such as the type of lineup used (simultaneous vs. sequential), the instructions given to the witness, and the characteristics of the fillers. It is in the realm of system variables that substantial psychological recommendations have been implemented to improve the fairness and validity of lineup procedures.

The malleability of memory is a significant concern. Post-event information, including suggestive comments or feedback from police (even unintentional), can contaminate the witness's memory and artificially inflate their confidence in an incorrect identification. This phenomenon underscores the crucial need for rigorous, standardized protocols designed to insulate the witness from suggestive external input.

#### 5. Best Practices for Lineup Administration

Following decades of research demonstrating the fragility of eyewitness memory, forensic psychologists and legal reformers have advocated for specific **best practices** regarding lineup administration to reduce bias and enhance reliability. These recommendations are codified in guidelines adopted by numerous state and federal jurisdictions, aiming to standardize procedures.

A primary best practice is **blind administration**, often referred to as double-blind testing. In a blind lineup, the police officer administering the procedure does not know which individual is the suspect and which are the fillers. This prevents the administrator, consciously or unconsciously, from

providing verbal or non-verbal cues (such as subtle gestures, changes in tone, or encouraging reinforcement) that could guide the witness toward the suspect. If a double-blind procedure is impractical, the procedure should be administered by a designated officer who has no knowledge of the case facts or the identity of the suspect.

Furthermore, witnesses must be given clear and unambiguous instructions. Crucially, they must be informed that the perpetrator **may or may not be present** in the lineup. Studies show that when this instruction is omitted, witnesses feel pressure to choose someone, increasing the relative judgment bias and the rate of choosing an innocent filler. Finally, the selection of fillers is paramount; they must match the witness's description of the perpetrator and ensure that the suspect does not unduly stand out. The identification process, including the instructions and the witness's statement of confidence, should be audio or video recorded to provide an objective record for judicial review.

## 6. Impact on Wrongful Convictions

Faulty eyewitness identification procedures constitute the single leading cause of wrongful convictions in cases later overturned by DNA evidence. Organizations like The Innocence Project have documented that **misidentification** was a contributing factor in over 60% of DNA exoneration cases in the United States. This stark statistic highlights the immense real-world consequences of unreliable lineups.

The problem is often compounded when an inaccurate identification is bolstered by feedback or suggestion. If an officer confirms a witness's choice, the witness's confidence in that identification typically skyrockets, making their testimony highly persuasive to a jury, even if the initial identification was erroneous. This effect, known as **post-identification confidence inflation**, transforms an uncertain memory into seemingly rock-solid testimony.

The recognition of this systemic failure has driven significant reform movements. Many states have adopted the American Bar Association's recommendations for sequential, blind lineup administration. These reforms are not merely theoretical; they are tangible attempts to leverage psychological science to prevent catastrophic miscarriages of justice that result when an innocent person is wrongly identified and convicted based on flawed procedure.

## 7. Debates and Criticisms

While the adoption of sequential, blind lineup procedures has been widely recommended, implementation remains varied across jurisdictions, and ongoing debates persist regarding the most effective procedures.

One major point of contention is the relative efficacy of simultaneous versus sequential lineups.

Although sequential procedures generally yield a lower rate of innocent suspect identification (fewer false alarms), they sometimes result in a slightly lower rate of accurate identification of the guilty party (fewer hits). Critics of sequential procedures argue that this slight decrease in accurate hits means more guilty parties may go free. Proponents, however, argue that the trade-off is necessary and preferable, prioritizing the reduction of false convictions over maximizing potential convictions.

Furthermore, the admissibility of expert testimony on eyewitness identification remains a debated legal issue. Some courts readily admit forensic psychologists to explain the dynamics of memory and the impact of suggestive procedures on the jury; others restrict such testimony, believing that juries are capable of assessing eyewitness credibility without specialized instruction. The ongoing tension between legal tradition, which values a witness's confident appearance, and psychological science, which questions the link between confidence and accuracy, ensures that the administration and interpretation of the lineup procedure will remain a topic of intense scrutiny in forensic and judicial contexts.

### Further Reading

[Eyewitness Identification \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[The Innocence Project: Eyewitness Misidentification](#)

[Police Lineup \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[NIJ Guide: Eyewitness Evidence: A Guide for Law Enforcement](#)