Show-Ups

A show-up is an identification procedure in which the police present a single suspect to a witness and ask, in effect, "Is this the person?" It is used most often in the field, soon after a crime, when officers detain someone near the scene and bring the witness to view that one individual — with no fillers and no array of alternatives. Because the procedure points unmistakably at one person, eyewitness experts have long regarded it as inherently suggestive and dangerous. The research bears out that concern, but in a way that is easy to misread: show-ups actually produce fewer identifications overall than lineups, yet a higher rate of false identifications of innocent suspects. This paper explains what show-ups are, what the studies — especially a major meta-analysis — actually show, why a lower choosing rate does not mean lower risk, and how the law treats this uniquely suggestive procedure. It is offered to inform the trier of fact and assumes no background in psychology.

What a Show-Up Is

A show-up differs from a lineup in the most basic way: it contains only the suspect. In a lineup the suspect is embedded among known-innocent fillers, so the array tests whether the witness can pick the suspect out from among plausible alternatives; a witness who chooses a filler makes a known error that harms no innocent suspect. A show-up offers no such test. The witness sees one person and renders a yes-or-no decision, and there is no filler whose selection would reveal that the witness was merely guessing (Dysart & Lindsay, 2007).

Show-ups are used because of practical necessity. When a suspect is detained shortly after a crime and near its location, a prompt show-up can quickly confirm or dispel suspicion while memory is fresh and before an innocent person is needlessly arrested or a guilty one escapes. That same immediacy, however, is paired with the structural suggestiveness of presenting a single, often handcuffed or police-accompanied individual — a tension that runs through both the science and the law of show-ups.

The Suggestiveness Concern and a Counterintuitive Finding

Surveys of the field confirm the longstanding worry. In a survey of eyewitness experts, 65% indicated that they regarded the show-up as a risky procedure, their concern directed at false identifications rather than correct ones (Kassin, Tubb, Hosch, & Memon, 2001). The intuition is straightforward: a procedure that presents only the suspect should pressure witnesses toward saying "yes," producing more choosing and especially more false identifications than a lineup.

The data complicate that intuition. In the most comprehensive synthesis, a meta-analysis by Steblay, Dysart, Fulero, and Lindsay (2003) found that show-ups yield a lower overall choosing rate (about 27%) than lineups (about 54%). Witnesses are, if anything, more willing to say "not there" to a show-up than to a lineup. This result is consistent with the idea that the lone, unsupported show-up leads witnesses to adopt a more cautious threshold before committing to an identification. But — as the next section explains — a lower rate of choosing does not translate into a lower rate of false identification, and reading the overall number as reassurance would be a serious mistake.

Why Lower Choosing Is Not Lower Risk

To see the real risk, the meta-analytic data must be separated according to whether the actual culprit is present or absent, because the two conditions carry very different consequences (Steblay et al., 2003). When the culprit is present, show-ups produce a lower choosing rate (about 46%) than lineups (about 71%) — but every correct show-up choice identifies the suspect, whereas many

lineup choices land on fillers. The net result is roughly equal correct-identification rates for the two procedures (about 45% in lineups). On the side of catching the guilty, show-ups and lineups perform about the same.

The danger appears when the culprit is absent and an innocent person stands in the suspect's place. Here show-ups produce a higher correct-rejection rate (about 85%) than lineups (about 57%): witnesses more often say "not there." Yet this apparent advantage is deceptive, because in a show-up every witness who does identify someone has identified an innocent person — there are no fillers to absorb mistaken choices. About 15% of witnesses falsely identify the innocent suspect in a show-up. In a lineup, roughly 43% of witnesses choose someone, but those choices are spread across six members; if the innocent suspect is no more alike the culprit than the fillers, the expected rate of falsely identifying that suspect is about 43% ÷ 6, or roughly 7% — less than half the show-up rate. The extra lineup choosers who pick fillers make known errors that endanger no innocent suspect.

The risk persists even when the innocent suspect actually resembles the culprit. In studies that designated the most similar lineup member as the innocent suspect, that person was chosen about 5% of the time from a lineup but about 12% of the time when presented alone in a show-up (Steblay et al., 2003). Across conditions, the pattern is consistent: correct-identification rates for show-ups and lineups are about equal, while false-identification rates are roughly two to three times higher for show-ups. For this reason it is misleading to set aside lineup filler choices as "known errors" and then compare only suspect choices: if 100 witnesses face a culprit-absent show-up and 100 face a culprit-absent lineup, the best estimate is that about 15 of the show-up witnesses but only about 7 of the lineup witnesses will falsely identify an innocent suspect. More innocent people are placed at risk of wrongful conviction when show-ups are used.

Why Show-Ups Distort: A Shift in the Decision Threshold

The leading explanation for these patterns concerns where witnesses set their internal threshold for deciding that a face matches their memory. Gonzalez, Ellsworth, and Pembroke (1993) documented that witnesses are less willing to say "not there" at a lineup than at a show-up — a response-bias difference observed in both live and photographic procedures and in both laboratory and real-world settings. The show-up's lower choosing rate, in this account, reflects a more conservative threshold rather than any superior accuracy.

More recent work shows that the threshold itself is not fixed and that this is where the danger lies. Smith, Wells, Lindsay, and Myerson (2018) tested the idea that when recognition is hard — as when the culprit is absent and no face truly matches — witnesses relax their criterion and accept a weaker match rather than miss their chance to identify. Simply telling witnesses they would have additional opportunities to identify the suspect later reduced innocent-suspect identifications sharply (from 33% to 15%) while barely affecting correct identifications of the culprit (57% to 51%); the standard "the culprit may or may not be present" admonition, by contrast, had no effect. The finding reveals a present-absent criterion discrepancy: witnesses apply a more lenient standard precisely when leniency is most dangerous, and a procedure offering no alternatives gives that leniency a single innocent target.

Variation, Age Effects, and the Limits of What Is Known

Show-up performance varies enormously across studies. Correct-identification rates have ranged from as high as roughly 92% to as low as 0%, a spread attributable to factors such as the similarity between the suspect and the witness's memory, the length and type of exposure (for example, live versus videotaped), and a match or mismatch in clothing between the crime and the procedure

(Dysart & Lindsay, 2007; Dysart, Lindsay, & Dupuis, 2006). Despite this variation, the literature consistently finds little or no difference between show-ups and lineups in correct-identification rates — with a possible exception for child and elderly witnesses in a few studies, an age effect that remains unsettled and warrants further research.

Modern analyses using methods that jointly weigh correct and false identifications reinforce the cautionary picture. Comprehensive reviews and receiver-operating-characteristic comparisons across thousands of participants conclude that show-ups are an inferior procedure to lineups, even under conditions that should favor show-ups, such as short delays or matching clothing (Neuschatz, Wetmore, Key, Cash, Gronlund, & Goodsell, 2016). The central practical message is the one the researchers urge be communicated to police and courts: the lower choosing rate of show-ups does not translate into a lower false-identification rate. Because so little remains known and because police will not abandon a procedure of evident field utility, the research counsel is not to ignore show-ups but to understand and constrain them.

Show-Ups and the Law

Show-ups occupy a distinctive place in identification law because they are the paradigm of a suggestive procedure. The foundational case is Stovall v. Denno (1967), a hospital-room show-up in which a wounded witness identified a single, handcuffed suspect. The Supreme Court recognized that presenting one suspect for identification is "widely condemned," yet held that a show-up violates due process only if it is "so unnecessarily suggestive and conducive to irreparable mistaken identification" as to deny a fair trial — and found no violation there because the witness was gravely injured, might not survive, and could view the suspect in no other way. Necessity, in other words, can justify an otherwise suggestive show-up.

Later decisions refined the inquiry from suggestiveness alone to reliability. Neil v. Biggers (1972) — itself a show-up case — and Manson v. Brathwaite (1977) held that even a suggestive identification may be admitted if it is nonetheless reliable under the totality of the circumstances, weighing factors such as the witness's opportunity to view, degree of attention, prior description, certainty, and the time between crime and identification. The eyewitness research bears on several of these factors and, in particular, cautions that a witness's confidence in a show-up identification is not a dependable proxy for accuracy. Perry v. New Hampshire (2012) then confined mandatory judicial screening of identification reliability to cases in which the suggestive circumstances were arranged by improper police action, leaving other reliability concerns to cross-examination, argument, and expert testimony.

Some courts have gone further in light of the science. In State v. Henderson (2011), the New Jersey Supreme Court reviewed the research at length and revised the framework and jury instructions for eyewitness evidence, treating show-up suggestiveness among the factors that can undermine reliability and that juries should be told to weigh. Whether an expert may explain show-up research to a jury is governed by the general standards for expert testimony — Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals (1993), as extended to specialized knowledge by Kumho Tire Co. v. Carmichael (1999), or the Frye general-acceptance test still followed in some jurisdictions (Frye v. United States, 1923). The comparative show-up findings rest on a published meta-analysis and converging replications and are among the better-supported results in the identification literature.

Special Issues in Legal Practice

The principles described above apply with equal force to every party in a legal proceeding. Memory operates the same way regardless of who is asking the questions, and the science summarized here favors no side. What differs between the parties is not the science but the vantage

point — the particular places where memory issues tend to surface, and the particular errors each party is best positioned to guard against. The two summaries below identify those recurring issues. They are offered for orientation, not as litigation strategy; in every case the controlling question is what the evidence in that case will, and will not, support, and the expert's role is to inform the trier of fact rather than to advocate for either side.

Special Issues for Prosecutors

For the State, a show-up identification is most defensible when the circumstances that justified it and the conditions under which it occurred are fully documented. The issue most likely to surface is necessity: why a show-up rather than a lineup was used — typically the need for a prompt field identification near the scene — and whether the procedure added avoidable suggestiveness beyond the inherent presentation of a single suspect. The error best guarded against is treating a show-up identification, or the witness's confidence in it, as equivalent in weight to a lineup identification, when the research shows show-ups carry a substantially higher false-identification rate in culprit-absent cases. Recording the time elapsed, the words used, whether the suspect was handcuffed or beside police, and the witness's immediate confidence statement allows the State to present a show-up whose reliability can be assessed on its actual merits.

Understood this way, the science guides the building of durable evidence rather than obstructing it. Where a prompt show-up was genuinely necessary and cleanly conducted, that record supports admissibility under the totality-of-circumstances standard; where corroborating evidence independent of the show-up exists, it carries particular value precisely because a single-suspect identification is the most suggestive of the available procedures.

Special Issues for Defense

For the defense, the recurring task is to examine whether a show-up was necessary, how suggestive it was, and what the resulting identification is actually worth. The issue most likely to surface is reliance on a single-suspect identification in a case where the culprit may have been absent — the very condition in which show-ups most often produce false identifications of innocent suspects. The error best guarded against is allowing the witness's confidence, or the bare fact of a positive show-up, to stand in for accuracy, given the documented criterion shift that leads witnesses to accept weaker matches when no true match is present. Scrutinizing the conditions — elapsed time, whether the suspect was handcuffed or flanked by officers, the instructions given, and the witness's first recorded level of certainty — can reveal how much suggestiveness shaped the result.

The corresponding safeguard is to ensure the jury understands what the comparative research establishes: that a show-up's lower overall choosing rate does not mean a lower false-identification rate; that correct-identification rates are about equal to lineups while false identifications run roughly two to three times higher; and that confidence in a suggestive procedure is a weak guide to accuracy. Where admissible, expert explanation of these findings, together with the controlling case law on suggestive identifications, can help the trier of fact weigh a show-up identification for what it is.

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