

Eyewitness

Would you make a good witness? Volunteers try to remember vital details from staged crimes.



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Programme running: 3 x 60 mins Production: BBC

Many of us will witness a violent crime at some point in our lives. The police will want us to describe what happened in detail, but our memory can play tricks on us. Could you give a reliable statement of exactly what happened?

Using actors, hidden cameras and interviews, we show the difference between what witnesses remember and what actually happened. Ten volunteers, who think they are taking part in a series about memory, find themselves key witnesses to two dramatic and violent crimes, secretly staged and filmed. Our volunteers find it surprisingly hard to remember the sequence of events, let alone who did what.

What Actually Happened?

After taking part in memory tests, our volunteers go to a restaurant, where some of them notice an argument at the next table. The staged dispute between three men quickly escalates into a fight and one of them is stabbed. Our volunteers are now what the police call 'key and significant eyewitnesses', but how accurately can they recall the details of the crime, and how do their accounts differ? One of our witnesses is a plant – an actor, whose job in this crime is to contaminate other witness's memory. Will she succeed?

Who did it?

Hidden cameras in our volunteers' glasses let us see exactly what they focus on in our second staged crime. State of the art eye tracker cameras let us look through their eyes. Do our volunteers make better witnesses second time around? When they get caught up in a bungled robbery and one of them is kidnapped, we find out how fear and the use of weapons affect what they remember. Some of our witnesses cannot describe suspects they saw clearly, yet recognise people they couldn't describe. Can they pick the right person in a police line up?



When the Only Witness is also the Victim

If the only witness is also the traumatized victim, it is much harder for the police to put a case together. In this programme we meet real witnesses and hear their harrowing stories.

Memory can be contaminated as easily as a crime scene, so it is crucial for the police to preserve and protect it. We look at an interview technique that can help retrieve the memory of a traumatized victim. In a world first, we test whether a new technology can improve our witnesses' memories of the two crimes they have seen.

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To find out more, please contact our Sales Team on +44 (0) 1908 659083
email: ouw-broadcast-sales@open.ac.uk or visit our website at:

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