The Problems of False Identification

In 1991, a man from Gary, Indiana, was convicted of robbery, criminal deviate conduct, and rape. However, the evidence used to convict the man, Darryl Pinkins, should have been inadmissible. Pinkins was a scrap metal worker in Gary. One day, while at the liquor store with five of his coworkers, someone broke into his car and stole their coverall uniforms. The workers alerted the factory, and they were issued new uniforms. A few days later, a woman called the police claiming that a group of five men rear-ended her, dragged her out of her car, took turns raping her, then stealing her belongings. Months later, Pinkins was brought in due to the fact that his DNA was found at the scene. The victim saw Pinkins, and identified him as the man who dragged her out of her car. Pinkins, a man who has never been in the trouble with the law in his life, was sentenced to 65 years. Another one of his coworkers was sentenced to 35 years, and the other three were dismissed.

Fran Watson, a law professor that also ran an innocence project at IUPUI, was asked to help Pinkins. For 17 years, Watson appealed for Pinkins release, arguing that the system had not followed the procedures correctly. In 2013, Watson sent DNA from the case to a lab that worked with new DNA analysis technology. There, the scientist determined that the evidence from the case had five distinct set of DNA—one for each of the alleged aggressors. In 2015, Watson submitted the evidence for an appeal, and Pinkins was granted a new hearing to be held in 2016. While waiting for the new hearing, “48 Hours” ran an episode on Pinkins, of which Watson used to twist the court’s arm. On April 22, 2016, the State of Indiana moved to drop Pinkins’ conviction.

The story of Darryl Pinkins is just a local example of a nationwide problem: false identification. Darryl Pinkins was convicted of rape when the major evidence used against him was that someone was wearing his uniform and that the victim recognized him months after the event. Across the country, people have been wrongly accused of a crime simply because the victim believed that their assailant was someone else. Multiple studies and news stories (just google “false identification eyewitness testimony”) have shown that eyewitness testimony is not as effective as people would like to think. Our minds break memories apart for storage and then try to bring them back together when we recall them. The problem, though, is that we tend to skew those memories, no matter how much stress we are under. This process can be improved with more accurate recalling techniques, but as this article states, the victim recognized Pinkins when he walked in the room while he was holding his daughter. It wasn’t until new DNA evidence was presented almost 25 years later that Pinkins was able to prove his innocence. Recent advances in DNA analysis should help stop these cases from happening as often. Hopefully, in the future, police will be able to correctly convict felons and not have as many mistakes with false identification. Hopefully, we will be able to find more accurate ways to incorporate eyewitness testimony into a case. And, hopefully, we will be able to stop accidentally sending innocent people to prison.
Sources

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http://specials.idsnews.com/darryl-pinkins/