

Research Probes What it Takes to Spot Wanted Fugitives

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(PhysOrg.com) -- When asked to be on the lookout for a fugitive, only a small percentage of participants in University of Arkansas studies spotted the wanted man or woman, even with the promise of a financial reward.

In the first program aimed at using basic research and theory on prospective memory to better understand searches for wanted fugitives, [psychology](#) professor James M. Lampinen and colleagues Jack D. Arnal and Jason L. Hicks conducted a series of field experiments designed to test prospective person memory. When people look at a photo of a wanted person or a missing child in order to spot that individual in the future, they are engaged in prospective person memory.

One set of field experiments used undergraduate students in introductory psychology classes to identify a wanted person. In each scenario, students were shown photos, told the individuals depicted would appear at some point in their daily lives and offered a share in a \$100 reward for spotting the “fugitive.” For all scenarios, the identification rate was low.

“One thing that real-life cases have going for them is that there are many more eyes,” Lampinen said. “You may have thousands who have seen the photo of a fugitive, so a 1 percent identification rate is still 10 people.”

In the first experimental scenario, students studied the photo of a wanted

person during one class session. The next time the class met, 48 hours later, the individual they had seen in the photo stepped into the classroom carrying a stack of papers and drew attention to himself both before and after handing the stack to the instructor. For the participating classes, the identification rate varied between zero and 7 percent.

To make the field experiment more realistic, the researchers showed classes a mock television news report with clear photos of two individuals wanted in a bank robbery. When the class met again two days later, the wanted fugitives, who looked very much in person as they had in the photos, sat outside the classroom door conducting a bake sale. To increase the chances of noticing the bake sale, researchers e-mailed half of the students a two-for-one coupon for cookies. The identification rate remained low, although those students who had received the cookie coupons identified the “bank robbers” 6.67 percent of the time as compared with 2.47 percent for the other students.

“The studies described above suggest that the ability of the general public to correctly identify wanted fugitives in realistic real world conditions is quite limited. In no study that we have conducted has the identification rate exceeded 7 percent,” the researchers wrote.

In their ongoing research, Lampinen and colleagues are exploring how to get people to take the time needed to form implementation intentions when presented with a photo of a missing or wanted person. For example, an implementation intention could involve resolving to contact authorities upon seeing a certain face.

“The potential combination of implementation intentions with imaging and pictorial encoding of faces holds great promise for the study of person prospective memory,” the researchers wrote.

The results of the fugitive recognition research were included in

“Prospective Person Memory,” a chapter in Applied Memory, edited by Matthew R. Kelley and published by Nova Science Publishers.

Provided by University of Arkansas ([news](#) : [web](#))

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