

Clarifying sources of information

Helping to get accurate accounts from witnesses.

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Clarifying sources of information – guideline

Throughout the first account, officers and staff should clarify the source of the information the witness is providing, for example by asking 'Did you see this yourself?'

Evidence summary

An analysis of 25 individual studies and two additional primary studies indicated that, on balance, warning individuals that they may have been exposed to misinformation from other sources prior to questioning them improves overall recall accuracy and reduces the likelihood of them reporting misinformation from other sources. The Guideline Committee felt that asking witnesses to clarify the source of the information would reduce the likelihood of them reporting information they had obtained from elsewhere.

Empirical evidence

Good

Practitioner evidence

Not available

Advising witnesses to help them give clear accounts

Research indicates that when witnesses are exposed to information about an event from other sources, their memory of what they witnessed themselves, and what they saw or heard from others can become confused. Advising witnesses about this possibility prior to asking them for their account can help them think carefully about the source of their memories and provide a more accurate account.

Research also shows that explaining to the witness why information they were exposed to after an event may be different to what they witnessed personally can increase the impact of the advice.

The Guideline Committee felt it would be important to clarify sources in a supportive way that does not make the witness feel disbelieved, so that rapport is maintained.

Officers/staff could provide this advice before starting the initial account, alongside other information providing clarity to the witness about what is needed from them. This process is sometimes described as setting the 'ground rules'. Practitioners felt this can help to set and manage expectations while taking initial details or for the wider process, as well as managing the questioning dynamic.

Ways of providing this advice

Hints and tips from the front line

You could:

- ask the person to explain what happened in their own words and to not to rely on what others have told them between the incident taking place and the officer's attendance
- emphasise to the person that the account should be from them personally, what they saw and heard, not what other people have told them
- advise them to be aware that some of what they read, especially on social media, might not necessarily be accurate

Tags

Evidence-based policing