

Effects of pretrial publicity on eyewitness memory

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Every day the impact that the media has on our daily life increases, sometimes for the best and sometimes for the worst. Media coverage of court cases prior to them going to trial, known as pretrial publicity (PTP), has become a major way in which the media can influence society's opinions. The majority of this media coverage tends to be negative (anti-defendant) pretrial publicity (N-PTP), and therefore can affect the fairness, and sometimes even the outcome, of a trial. In fact, plenty of research exists confirming the negative effects that PTP can have on jurors. But what about the impact of N-PTP on eyewitnesses to a crime who will later have to testify? Eyewitness memory has been found to be very fragile. Research regarding the misinformation effect demonstrates that misinformation presented after witnessing an event can change an eyewitness's memory and, in some cases, can lead witnesses to incorporate new details into the previously acquired memory. If this is the case, how much of an impact can PTP have on eyewitness memory? The answer to this question remains to be seen, though it could have great implications on the way the criminal justice system functions. This presentation will focus on the experimental methods the author is currently employing to begin exploring this question, along with reviewing the research used in hypothesis development for this project.

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