

# Denver Law Review

---

Volume 14 | Issue 3

Article 3

---

July 2021

## Science in Law Enforcement

John Edgar Hoover

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/dlr>

---

### Recommended Citation

John Edgar Hoover, Science in Law Enforcement, 14 Dicta 60 (1936-1937).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Denver Law Review at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Denver Law Review by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [dig-commons@du.edu](mailto:dig-commons@du.edu).

## SCIENCE IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

*Address delivered by JOHN EDGAR HOOVER, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Department of Justice, before the Annual Convention of the International Association for Identification, at Dallas, Texas, 10 A. M., September 29, 1936.*

ONE paramount thought which comes to my mind as I greet you today is that of progress. As I look back upon the days when the fingerprint records of America could be placed in a room not one-tenth as large as this hall in which I address you, I am extremely gratified to consider the present situation. In a comparatively short time, a nation which was literally benighted in its efforts at fingerprint identification has advanced to a position greater than that of all the rest of the world combined.

Only a few days ago there reached the Identification Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation the six million three hundred thousandth fingerprint card as contributed by over 10,000 agencies in America, supplemented by 76 agencies from the rest of the world. And when you realize that it was only 35 years ago that the Henry System was inaugurated at Scotland Yard, and 33 years ago that the first fingerprint bureau in the history of American penology came into being, this is indeed remarkable progress.

We are accustomed to look upon the growth of American industry as expressed in terms of steel, automobiles, and like products. However, the record of fingerprinting bears a story of romantic progress which compares favorably to a number of the big industries.

A few years ago there were few fingerprint experts in America other than those in the identification units of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the larger police departments. At the present time, however, due to the continually growing use of the fingerprint science, the number of fingerprint experts employed in law-enforcement agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, has increased to thousands. This increase in employment of fingerprint experts naturally has been accompanied by a like increase in employment for the necessary scientific and clerical personnel which comprises the force actually handling the flood of fingerprint records now coming from all parts of the world.

To this total, of course, must be added the thousands upon thousands of persons employed in the contributing agencies, to say nothing of the mechanical growth and employment in the industrial concerns manufacturing fingerprint equipment. This represents the development of an entirely new industry, which is still in its infancy. When greater education brings to the mind of the people the necessity for wider use of civil fingerprinting, the business of which I speak will increase nearly a hundredfold, thus offering an opportunity for thousands upon thousands of alert men and extending the vocation of the identification expert into a business which will compare favorably with even our largest enterprises. Therefore, we are accomplishing something more than identification. We are creating a new field of endeavor to take up the slack of unemployment and especially for that person about whom so much has been written in the last few years—the white collar worker.

Pursuing this same thought, a percentage of increase in new employment comes about through the growth of science as applied to crime. Only four years ago, the Federal Bureau of Investigation determined to begin the building of a science laboratory. At that time, this was a task comparable with that of a voice crying in the wilderness, for while imaginative fiction writers had done much to implant the thought of scientific detection, the practical criminal chaser believed that he could obtain better results by the old method built upon information received. In other words, an informer was held in higher esteem than the exact findings of science. However, with the aid of progressive law-enforcement officials, many of them members of this association, eagerly spreading the word that here at last could be built a central agency, the missionary work was carried on.

Today in the Federal Bureau of Investigation approximately 50 scientists are steadily employed and the work is increasing by leaps and bounds, until we can look forward to the time when the unethical itinerant "so-called" expert, willing to testify for whichever side offers the most money, the prosecution or the defense, will become a thing of the past. I am glad to know that this association insists upon absolute integrity in this respect.

An expert must be highly trained in a specialized field. The man who pretends to qualify upon a multiplicity of subjects and through a combining of chicanery with a Mumbo Jumbo of scientific terms to confuse the prosecution, the defense, and the jury, all looking toward the acquittal of a guilty man, has been allowed too much freedom in criminal cases. Before the trial of accused persons can be made thoroughly fair, this type of unethical expert must become a figure of the past. In only one way can this be accomplished and that is by thoroughly impartial adjudication of the scientific aspects of evidence by experts who are swayed solely by their findings, based upon the solid foundation of scientific fact.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation Crime Laboratory has no bias and no opinion other than that brought out by the cold findings of the microscope, fingerprint development equipment, chemical analysis, and related equipment. There is no desire to convict when the evidence shows innocence and the findings of the scientific laboratory are so reported. If I may give an illustration from the hundreds of cases which flood through the crime laboratory, I would like to cite that of a murder in faraway Alaska.

A prospector was found slain in a remote district. Through the efforts of the United States Marshal, the evidence in the case was taken by dog team across the snowy wastes and then flown by airplane into Fairbanks, Alaska, from which point it was forwarded to Washington. This evidence showed that two persons were suspected. One was an ex-convict, who had been found leaving the approximate scene of the crime carrying a rifle and with his clothing stained by blood; the other was an Eskimo boy, who also had been found in the neighborhood and also carrying a rifle. Naturally, the evidence pointed more strongly toward the ex-convict because of his former record. However, the science laboratory viewed the evidence only as evidence, and made its tests for the establishment of human blood and the comparison of the murder bullet with that of the rifles. We sent the word to Alaska that the ex-convict was innocent. His defense concerning the bloodstains was true, for the chemical analysis carried out more than 3,000 miles from the scene of the crime had shown these bloodstains to be from something

other than that of a human lifestream. Moreover, a bullet fired from the gun of the Eskimo boy showed conclusively when placed under a comparison microscope that it matched the bullet which had caused the death of the murdered man. So the ex-convict was freed of suspicion and the Eskimo boy was confronted with the evidence of science. He confessed his crime and entered a plea of guilty in court.

Such cases, with their almost uncanny results, build strongly toward a tremendous new growth in law enforcement. Only two years ago, the crime laboratories of some of the large cities, including one of our greatest, were referred to in a disparaging manner by the rank and file of the police departments themselves. The policemen on the beat sneered at the efforts of these men who attempted to trace crime through the microscope and the ballistics equipment. However, after only two outstanding evidences of the ability of the crime laboratory to trace evidence, one a murder case and the other the identification of counterfeit bonds through the restoration of obliterated writing, the entire attitude of the force has changed, and now they are proud to be known as men who have the backing of science and scientific equipment in the solution of crime. Again, because of this development, a field of employment has opened for the young college man in increasing scope and the next few years will see tremendous growths in this field of endeavor.

In an endeavor to bring to the police officers in the field some of its identification facilities, the Federal Bureau of Investigation several months ago announced that fingerprint identification schools would be conducted in each of its thirty-seven field offices as soon as circumstances would permit. There have been five of these schools conducted to date. The project, which I consider to be definitely constructive, was inaugurated under the auspices and with the approval of the president of the International Association for Identification. These schools, which cover a period of approximately five days, have been well attended and enthusiastic approval has been given to the courses conducted, which have been presented largely by bureau officials from Washington, assisted in specialized branches by local police identification officers. The first of these schols was conducted at Dallas and the offi-

cers in this locality provided the impetus which has prompted the conduct of subsequent schools elsewhere. It is my personal feeling that these schools will do a great deal to crystallize and standardize systems and pattern interpretations of a technical nature and also will aid materially in the education of officers concerning the latest methods of the development and presentation of latent evidence in court.

At the present time the Federal Bureau of Investigation is embarking upon a new effort to throw more tightly the net of science about the activities of the criminal world. I refer to the National Stolen Property File, in which it is hoped that descriptions of certain types of stolen property will be placed on file at the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington so that it may become a center of identification in theft cases throughout the United States. As in the early days of fingerprint identification, there must be missionary work on the part of every identification officer so that this plan will be widely and favorably known and aided by law-enforcement officers everywhere. The nerve center of such information often originates in the Identification Division of a police department and the members of the International Association for Identification can aid tremendously in the development of this new attack upon crime. Your enthusiastic efforts helped to create the greatest fingerprint collection in the history of the world. You can do the same for a repository of descriptions of stolen property.

The International Association for Identification is a tremendous force in lessening the toll of crime. Its vigilance in thousands of instances has resulted in the capture of vicious criminals who otherwise might have gone free. Criminals may change their name, they may seek plastic surgeons in an effort to alter their appearance, they may buy political and other pressure in order to remain free, they may seek the shadows of criminal hideouts, but once their fingerprints travel into the Identification Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, as built up through your enthusiastic assistance, little time passes before all of their efforts are made useless through the incontrovertible evidence of their fingerprints upon a master card in the files, and the notice which announces that this man is wanted.

The criminal element has made many efforts to outwit the identification system. Effort after effort has been made to throw suspicion on the infallibility of fingerprints. Recently, in Texas, a determined attempt was made to prove that fingerprints could be duplicated and that they could be changed; it was exposed and made useless through the activities of the International Association for Identification. Again, in a western state, an effort was made to prove that identical prints could exist. Through the work of the experts of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the error was exposed.

These instances without instant refutation by the members of your association can do much to shake public confidence in fingerprint identification. It is the duty of all of us to constantly build a wall of confidence in the minds of the public against such destructive publicity. The public must be given the benefit of the knowledge that fingerprinting is sure and that a chance of reproduction in fingerprints is so remote as to be classed as an utter impossibility.

In the history of the fingerprinting science there has never been a duplication of fingerprints. In spite of all the work and scheming of crooked doctors, of the plans and expense, to say nothing of the torture, undergone by criminals, there has never been a case in the history of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in which a wanted man has been able to alter his fingerprints beyond identification. Your association here again has accomplished great results in its watchfulness and notification of attempts at the alteration of fingertip patterns.

May I suggest to the members of the association that whenever any individual is arrested, whose fingers bear evidence of possible mutilation, the Federal Bureau of Investigation be notified immediately in order that appropriate steps may be taken at once to secure the positive identification of the individual. I feel that every criminal who endeavors to mutilate his fingerprints merely brands himself further as a criminal because he necessarily leaves scars on the bulbs of his fingers which immediately indicate that he has endeavored to conceal his identity through this practice. These scars, of course, are a definite indication of the attempt to avoid the establishment of identity and are an immediate signal to the arresting official that the person in his custody should be treated with more than ordinary care.

Also, we can go farther than has been done in a number of instances in the accompanying data which should go forward with every fingerprint card. Too often these cards reach the bureau without the necessary background of the criminal or with too hasty a delineation of criminal history. We must remember that a man's history is equally important with his status of identification. The sentencing of criminals and the time which they must serve often depends upon their criminal record as given to the judge at the time of sentence.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation can only forward such identification data to police departments as these police departments forward to the bureau. If identification cards do not contain the full criminal history of a man, especially regarding his time served in prison, disposition of the case following arrest, or his parole and pardon record, then indeed the sentencing judge has little upon which to base his opinion in determining the disposition of this man following conviction in court. The same is true for parole boards and for those possessing the power of clemency. It leaves a loophole of excuse for persons who favor light sentences of easy freedom by which they can excuse their actions on the grounds of ignorance. This gap must be closed. Alibis for the quick release of convicted men upon the contention that their previous record was unknown must become an impossibility.

The time will come when the identification activities of the International Association for Identification will be looked upon not only as the foe of the criminal but the friend of the good citizen, the protector, the assistant, the character reference and the repository of information which will give the honest man greater freedom and greater peace of mind. I refer, of course, to the growth of civil fingerprinting which now has reached a point where 200,000 fingerprint cards of reputable citizens are on file. In the Bureau's Identification Division a total of 600 such civil cards are being received each day. This means that the slow work of education is proceeding against what was a solid wall of ignorance and that the inhibitions of the average citizen against having his fingerprints on file gradually are being broken down. All of us must become missionaries in this endeavor.

America only can have widespread civil fingerprint identification through education concerning its benefits. Here is



an agency which must be looked upon by the average citizen as his proof of identity and of good standing in a community. It must be looked upon as his protector in case of accident, amnesia, loss of identity or death, through circumstances which make his identification under ordinary means impossible. As conditions exist today, the criminal who is found dead may be returned to his loved ones for decent burial and for the eradication of the uncertainty, the worries, the fears and torments which descend upon a family when one of its members has been lost for years. However, the honest citizen who dies under such circumstances and who is not protected by his fingerprint identification goes to a grave in a potter's field and his family sorrows for years in ignorance of his fate.

There is no recommendation of identity as good as that of being able to say that a citizen has thought enough of his future and of his family to place his mark of identification on file in this manner. May I say that had a certain child's fingerprints been on record at the Federal Bureau of Investigation, there would have been no opportunity for the friends of a dastardly kidnaper to have cast doubt upon the identification of this baby's body and thus confuse, confound, and becloud evidence in a case which pointed conclusively to this kidnaper's guilt. There is no stigma to such a method of identification. It is a badge of honor. It should give one a standing in a community. It should be a letter of recommendation to any bank or insurance or business institution and it should be the duty of good citizens everywhere to assume the leadership in this movement by preaching its usefulness to employes and friends everywhere.

It is regrettable that racketeers are today preying upon the growing popularity of civil fingerprinting through the establishment of fake bureaus which pretend to protect employers and for a heavy fee to fingerprint organization groups, babies in hospitals, and private citizens, offering them universal protection, which can exist only in such a vast repository as that maintained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This is being accomplished through glib-tongued organizers and high-pressure salesmen and is a type of petty graft which is fastening itself upon business and for which there is no necessity.

It costs nothing, as you know, to file a civil fingerprint card in the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Members of your association can perform no better service than to spread the word in their communities that there is no fingerprint service on earth that can do more to protect the average citizen than that of the Civil Fingerprint Section of this bureau, and that to obtain this protection costs not one cent and necessitates only the slight effort of having one's fingerprints placed upon a civil fingerprint card at one of the identification units of the police department or other law-enforcement agency in their locality.

Let us, therefore, constantly be vigilant toward the building of this protectorate. Let us tell the good citizen what it means to him. Let us paint for him the picture of two men who look alike, who act alike, and who talk alike but who think differently. Let us show that one of these men can be a pillar of honesty in his community while another is a representative of the most degraded segments of the underworld. Let us show how easily the identities can be confused; how difficult it might be for the honest citizen to prove an alibi if the other man, who is his double in appearance, has committed a murder and has been seen by a number of witnesses proceeding from the scene of the crime. Let us show this honest citizen that in such a case there is a great safeguard against the inconvenience of suspicion through mistaken identity and that is the presence of his fingerprints in the civil fingerprint file so that they may be compared with the fingerprints of the criminal and shown to be different.

There are few celebrities who have not, at one time or another, endured the contumely of local gossip and scandal due to the fact that someone who resembles them has taken their name and preyed upon innocent citizens as an impostor. The presence of fingerprints in the civil fingerprint file in such cases as these is a thing of utmost importance. The man of outstanding position who does not so protect himself is failing to avail himself of a bulwark against the impostor, the schemer, the faker and grafter who may at any time bring him annoyance, loss of money, and distinctly unfavorable publicity.

Our task, therefore, as members of the International Association for Identification might be compared to the tre-

mendous work done by the supporting forces of an army. Our active police officers are the first lines of offense and defense. They are the ones who actively meet the enemy upon the field of battle, but they labor against overwhelming odds without the supporting strength of properly equipped, efficient batteries of identification units and scientific methods of detection and apprehension. Without these forces, they struggle in the dark; they are faced constantly with the danger of sending men to prison on a basis of resemblance, thus being vulnerable to the attacks of that inevitable pack of shysters which feeds for years upon any mistake of the law. But when they are supported by forces of infallibility in matters of identification, then, indeed, can they proceed with surety upon a full-charted and well-mapped plan of warfare against the offender and for the protection of the honest man. Indeed, the honest man needs protection in these days when 12,000 murders each year are committed, when almost a quarter of a million potential murderers roam America with 300,000 persons doomed to die at their hands. He needs protection when each year there are 1,500,000 major crimes, such as assault, rape, burglary, arson, and murder.

We are facing a dangerous situation when, of the criminal fingerprint records received, more than 50% represent men and women who have committed more than one crime. Only through the steady building of higher ideals in which law enforcement becomes a career instead of a mere job; through education that crime is something which must not and cannot be entered into lightly, and through the dissemination of the knowledge that apprehension is swift and punishment is certain can the majesty of the law be looked upon with the seriousness necessary to bring about the respect which it should command. To this end we must all dedicate our every thought and effort. It is worthy, it is necessary, and it represents an ambition for which we all should work—the ambition to see America take its place in the list of nations as a place of cleanliness, of moral integrity, and of safety for our homes, our families, and our children. I feel sure that the efforts of all of us here today are so dedicated. May we proceed faithfully to the performance of a well-defined duty, a goal worthy of achievement—the hope of a crime-free America.