

# Untruths and Consequences

A Message from the IACP IMPACT Section

**MANY PEOPLE ARE TAUGHT OR BELIEVE THAT “AN INNOCENT PERSON WOULDN’T CONFESS TO CRIMES THEY DIDN’T COMMIT.” SOME INSTRUCTORS HAVE PROBABLY USED THAT SAME PHRASE WHEN TEACHING OTHERS OVER THE YEARS, OFTEN CONNECTED TO AN ANECDOTAL “WAR STORY” OF A SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCE WITH A FAVORABLE OUTCOME.**

Such was the customary learning that occurred, instructors basing their lessons on experiences often told—and retold—in storytelling fashion. This observational learning frequently involved stories of some stellar conviction involving a skillfully obtained confession confirming the officer’s investigative instincts (or, at times, hunches). Prosecutors wanted confessions to facilitate easier convictions and demonstrate to juries that the accused themselves had admitted guilt, and investigators delivered, with questioning becoming confession focused. Unfortunately, non-diagnostic anecdotal stories can result in untruths. While law enforcement has embraced science to improve many aspects of policing, interview and interrogation practices remained far from scientific grounding.

The 2006 Intelligence Science Board study, *Educating Information—Interrogation: Science and Art*, revealed that the U.S. government had not sponsored any significant research on interrogation-related topics since the 1960s. The President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice published *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society* in 1967, making 200 recommendations, with chapters such as “Science and Technology” and “Research—Instrument for Reform.” One of the report’s central conclusions was that “the system of criminal justice must eliminate existing injustices if it is to achieve its ideals and win the respect and cooperation of all citizens.”

While the Johnson Crime Commission cited the “startling advances in the physical and biological sciences,” it wasn’t until U.S. President Barack Obama administration’s creation of a High-Value Detainee Interrogation Group (HIG), with a dedicated Research Unit, that significant resources were committed to evaluate current interrogation practices and offer evidence-based improvements. The group’s mandate was to “develop a set of best practices and disseminate these for training purposes among agencies that conduct interrogations,” resulting in an investment of over \$15 million in more

than 100 peer-reviewed research studies conducted by renowned behavioral scientists. This diagnostic analysis reveals that coercive and accusatorial confession-driven interrogation practices can result in false confessions and degrade memory recall; however, developing rapport and trust and using information-gathering methods can yield more accurate information; more overall information, including admissions of guilt; and less false information. The accusatorial ethos and presumption of guilt in confrontational approaches can have unintended consequences.

The 2013 IACP National Summit on Wrongful Convictions addressed how false confessions contributed to wrongful convictions and damaged the trust between communities and police. As of September 2019, the Innocence Project documented that “suspects” had falsely confessed to crimes they didn’t commit in 25 percent of the 365 DNA exonerations. Efforts continue at the United Nations to develop universal guidelines for lawful, human rights-compliant, and effective non-coercive interview and interrogation standards. The psychological perspectives on interview and interrogation have much to offer as law enforcement seeks to improve the practice and build better community-police trust.

The untruth that “an innocent person wouldn’t confess to crimes they didn’t commit” has been answered by science, and today’s professionals also know the consequences of unscrupulous interrogations, false confessions, and wrongful convictions. If we artfully apply the science, we can move from community-oriented policing to community-embraced policing. ♡



Learn more about IACP’s Sections, including the International Managers of Police Academy and College Training (IMPACT) Section, and how to participate at [theIACP.org/working-group/sections](https://theIACP.org/working-group/sections).