

Fingerprinting

SINCE THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY, fingerprinting has been regarded as an **irrefutable** method of identification by the United States government and law enforcement agencies. In England and Wales, the use of fingerprinting technology for criminal investigation dates to 1901, using theories developed by anthropologist Sir Francis Galton. Galton identified the characteristics by which individual fingerprints can be distinguished; these characteristics are frequently referred to as Galton's Details, and this method of interpretation is still in use today.

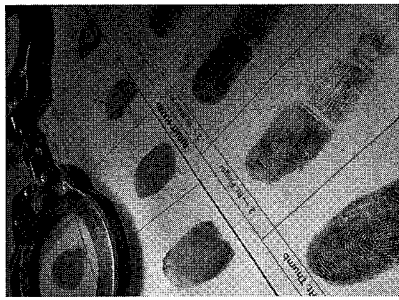
The scientific basis for fingerprinting is founded on three basic tenets: first, that the ridge arrangement on every finger of every person is unique to that person; second, that the ridge arrangement remains unchanged during a person's entire lifetime; and third, that the pattern is unable to be removed. Until recently, these facts seemed to point to an unshakable method for identifying any individual.

Over the last two decades, however, some high profile cases have highlighted possible flaws in this method of investigation. One of the most notable was that of the Madrid bombing in 2004; Brandon Mayfield, a U.S. citizen and a lawyer, was accused of being a partici-

pant in the terrorist attack on the Spanish city's commuter train system, based on fingerprints at the scene, which were subsequently examined by the FBI, using an automated, computerized matching system. While the FBI termed the results "incontrovertible," the Spanish National Police were unconvinced. Two weeks later, the Spanish force identified another suspect; the FBI was forced to admit its error.

More recently, in Philadelphia, a federal judge named Louis H. Pollak issued a ruling questioning the soundness of fingerprinting evidence.

While his ruling pertains only to a specific case related to a drug and murder charge, it could easily resonate in future trials. Lawyers for the defense in the case sought to have fingerprint evidence blocked; Pollak overruled the objection and allowed the evidence to be seen by the jury, but the judge would not permit experts to testify that the prints found at the scene matched the defendant's prints, which brought into question the techniques inherent in fingerprint matching. Whether other judges begin to echo Pollak's skepticism, and whether this previously unquestioned investigative technique fades in its usefulness to law enforcement, remains an open question.



QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the author wrote this passage?

- A. to show that fingerprinting may be a flawed method for investigating a crime
- B. to tell the history of fingerprinting
- C. to illustrate how the use and interpretation of fingerprinting evidence may be evolving in the courtroom
- D. to show that law enforcement can make mistakes

2. Sir Francis Galton was important to the development of fingerprint technology

- A. because he showed how to interpret fingerprints in order to make a match.
- B. because he proved that no two individuals have the same fingerprints.
- C. because his theory still proves the relevance of fingerprinting.
- D. because no one has disproved his theory.

3. Louis H. Pollak contributed to the controversy surrounding fingerprint science by

- A. refusing the government lawyer's objection.
- B. refusing to allow experts in fingerprinting to testify in the case.
- C. stating that fingerprinting did not have sufficient scientific grounding.
- D. keeping the defendant's lawyer from mentioning fingerprinting.

4. As used in the passage, the word *irrefutable* most nearly means

- A. distrusted.
- B. unable to be believed.
- C. without doubt.
- D. contrary to opinion.

5. The best title for this passage might be

- A. Fingerprinting—the Beginning of Forensic Science.
- B. Fingerprint Analysis: Sound or Flawed Science?
- C. How Fingerprinting Changed Crime Fighting.
- D. Judge Pollak Confronts the Experts.

6. Answer the following question using complete sentences:

Should fingerprint analysis be admissible in court or should it be excluded from cases? Why or why not?