

The Real CSI

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From the courtroom to the living room (thanks to the hit television series “CSI”), forensic science is king. Expertise on fingerprints, ballistics, and bite mark analysis are routinely called on to solve the most difficult criminal cases—and to put the guilty behind bars. But how reliable is the science behind forensics? A FRONTLINE investigation finds serious flaws in some of the best-known tools of forensic science and wide inconsistencies in how forensic evidence is presented in the courtroom.

FRONTLINE examines one of the most high-profile terrorist investigations since 9/11: the case of Brandon Mayfield, an attorney who was wrongfully identified and arrested as a suspect in the Madrid commuter train bombings after the FBI erroneously matched his fingerprint to a partial print found at the scene. The case exposed the weaknesses of fingerprint identification, causing the FBI to change the way its examiners testify about the reliability of forensic fingerprinting.

In the small town of Brooksville, Mississippi, FRONTLINE explores the errors that led to the guilty verdicts of two innocent men, whose convictions were partially based on faulty bite-mark testimony, revealing that bite-mark identification is another one of several seriously flawed forensic tools used in criminal investigations.

And nowhere in recent history has forensic evidence been more prominent than in the trial of Casey Anthony, who was acquitted of the first-degree murder of her 2-year-old daughter, Caylee Anthony. Based on a smell from the trunk of Casey Anthony’s car and an expert in “the odor of the dead,” the prosecution set out to convince the jury that the stench was that of a decaying body. In total, 37 expert witnesses from more than a dozen areas of forensics testified, with the defense challenging with forensic experts of their own.

FRONTLINE documents how a field with few uniform standards and unproven science can undermine the search for justice. As part of an ongoing look at forensic science, correspondent Lowell Bergman reports in a joint investigation with ProPublica and the Investigative Reporting Program at UC Berkeley.

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