



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on May 28, 2012

## Experts Weigh in After Four Witnesses in Trayvon Martin Case Change Story

Several key witnesses in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin by Neighborhood Watch captain George Zimmerman have changed their original stories since first being interviewed by law enforcement, according to news reports about recently released evidence in the case. Some analysts cited in the media speculated that three of those revised accounts might hurt the shooter's claims of self-defense as the second-degree murder prosecution goes through the Florida court system.



Experts in the field, however, have noted that later recollections — which could be impacted by external factors such as publicity, for example — are thought to be less reliable than earlier memories. And the addition of post-event information into the memory reconstruction process, normally unbeknownst to the person, is one reason why psychologists believe that eyewitness testimony can often be unreliable.

“To fill in gaps in memory, the eyewitness relies upon his or her expectation, attitudes, prejudices, bias, and prior knowledge,” [explained](#) University of North Dakota forensic psychologist Richard Wise. “Furthermore, information supplied to an eyewitness after a crime ... by the police, prosecutor, other eyewitnesses, media, etc., can alter an eyewitness's memory of the crime.”

Once that happens, Wise told the site *Life's Little Mysteries*, those witnesses generally do not even realize that their memories of the event have been changed. Not only do they feel confident that they are remembering the incident accurately, it also becomes very hard or even impossible to restore their original memories about it, he explained.

Thus far, according to legal experts, much of the information released publicly — photos, witness accounts, medical reports, and more — has largely tended to support Zimmerman's version of events. Essentially, he claimed to have fired his gun in self-defense after Martin attacked him, bashed his head on the ground, and broke his nose. Authorities originally declined to arrest him or press charges, at least until a national frenzy of misleading media reports and race-hate agitators sparked an outcry.

But since the mass coverage of the incident began — much of it, such as an NBC report carefully edited to make Zimmerman appear racist, demonstrably deceitful — at least four of the witnesses have altered their accounts in ways that could impact the prosecution. According to a [report](#) in the *Orlando Sentinel*, which first picked up the story, one woman abandoned her initial story completely, while three others' recollections changed in “ways that may damage Zimmerman.”

One young woman who lives in the gated community where the shooting happened, known publicly only as “Witness 2,” originally told law enforcement that she had seen two men running. The pair eventually got into a fist fight, she said, but because she had just removed her contact lenses prior to witnessing the scene, she did not know who was hitting whom. The woman told similar versions of that story in at least three official interviews with local and state authorities.



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But during follow-up questioning in late March by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement — after the shooting had garnered explosive national attention — she only remembered one person running. And she had no idea who it was. “I couldn’t tell you if it was a man, a woman, a kid, black or white. I couldn’t tell you because it was dark and because I didn’t have my contacts on or glasses,” the woman was quoted as saying. “I just know I saw a person out there.”

Another woman, known as “Witness 12,” first told investigators in late March that she saw two people on the ground after the fatal shot was fired, but did not know who had been on top. Other witnesses who spoke to the press about the incident said they were sure Martin had been on top. And the well-documented grass stains on the back of Zimmerman’s sweater, as well as the wounds on the back of his head, would tend to support that, according to analysts.

About a week after her first interview, however, “Witness 12” told prosecutors that she was sure Zimmerman had been on top. “I know after seeing the TV of what’s happening, comparing their sizes, I think Zimmerman was definitely on top because of his size,” she was quoted as saying in a recorded interview.

A man who reportedly lives just a few feet from where Martin was shot, “Witness 6,” largely corroborated Zimmerman’s story. He told police on the night of the incident that a black man was on top of Zimmerman “just throwing down blows on the guy, MMA[Mixed Martial Arts]-style,” and that the man being pummeled — Zimmerman — had been calling for help.

Three weeks later, however, the same man told investigators that while Martin was definitely on top, he was no longer sure whether the black teenager was actually punching Zimmerman or not. “I truly can’t tell who, after thinking about it, was yelling for help just because it was so dark out on that sidewalk,” the man added in his later interview.

The fourth man to have changed his original story, “Witness 13,” spoke with Zimmerman right after the shooting. At the time, the man told police that a bloodied Zimmerman had asked him to call Zimmerman’s wife and explain that he had been forced to shoot Martin because the 17-year-old football player had been beating him up. About a month later, the witness told investigators that Zimmerman had acted like the shooting “was nothing.”

According to analysts, much of the eyewitness testimony is contradictory. Some people, for example, claimed to have heard a second gun shot — in reality, Zimmerman fired only one shot. Other witnesses said they saw shirts that nobody was wearing, the *Miami Herald* reported. And taken together, the inaccurate accounts show how unreliable witness statements can be — especially in situations like this.

“Memory does not function like a videotape that records everything and can be replayed at will,” Innocence Project eyewitness identification litigation fellow Karen Newirth told the *Herald*. “People remember pieces of events, and then fill in the blanks with what makes sense.”

Other experts have noted that the earliest accounts are probably also the most reliable. “All other things equal, earlier recountings are more likely to be accurate than later ones,” Stanford University psychology Professor Barbara Tversky was [quoted as saying](#) by the *Scientific American*. “The longer the delay, the more likely that subsequent information will get confused with the target memory.”

The defense and the prosecution are both seeking to keep evidence under wraps for now, according to news reports. Zimmerman is currently out on bail and maintains that he is innocent. The next court date is scheduled for August.



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Some legal experts such as Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz have [blasted](#) prosecutors and called for the murder charges to be dropped, but others say that there is presumably still some evidence that has not yet been released. Race profiteers who have staked their reputations on the case, political opportunists, and Martin supporters, however, are all insisting that Zimmerman is a murderer and should be convicted.

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*Photo: George Zimmerman, center, is directed by a Seminole County Deputy and his attorney Mark O'Mara during a court hearing on April 12, 2012, in Sanford, Fla.: AP Images*



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