

Alphonse Bertillon Biography

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Biography

The French criminologist Alphonse Bertillon (1853-1914) was the inventor of the first scientific method of identifying criminals.

Alphonse Bertillon was born in Paris on April 24, 1853. He was the son of Louis Adolphe Bertillon, a physician and statistician. Because of Alphonse's poor scholarship, his father sent him to Great Britain, where he was forced to rely on his own resources. Returning to France, he was inducted into the army.

In 1879, having completed his service, he took a minor clerk's job with the Paris Prefecture of Police. One of his duties was to copy onto small cards the recorded descriptions of the criminals apprehended each day. Bertillon realized that the short descriptions he was laboriously re-recording were practically useless for the purpose of identifying recidivists, or criminal repeaters. He had a general familiarity with anthropological statistics and anthropometric techniques because of the work of his father and his elder brother Jacques, a doctor and statistician. Bertillon devised a system of identification of criminals which relies on 11 bodily measurements and the color of the eyes, hair, and skin. He added standardized photographs of the criminals to his anthropometric data. He first described his system in *Photography: With an Appendix on Anthropometrical Classification and Identification* (1890). The Bertillon system proved successful in distinguishing first-time offenders from recidivists, and it was adopted by all advanced countries.

It is commonly believed that Bertillon was the first to recognize the value of fingerprints. He was not; that achievement must be associated with Sir Francis Galton, Edward Henry, and Juan Vucetich. However, Bertillon was the first on the Continent to use fingerprints to solve a crime.

In 1888 the Department of Judicial Identity was created for the Paris prefecture of Police, and Bertillon became its head. He invented many techniques useful to criminologists. His use of photography was especially effective, and he did much to improve photographic techniques in criminology. Around the turn of the century, fingerprinting began to replace the Bertillon system and has now superseded it throughout the world.

Bertillon died on Feb. 13, 1914, in Paris. His anthropometric method of identifying recidivists represented a first step toward scientific criminology. It is said that his work played an important role in inspiring greater confidence in police authorities and in establishing a more favorable sense of justice toward the end of the 19th century.