

Fingerprint mutilation on the rise, but it's practically pointless

July 23, 2010 By Jesse Solomon, CNN



In the 1930s, John Dillinger used acid on his fingertips in an attempt to make his prints unidentifiable.

In crime labs across the country, law enforcement officials say more and more suspects are attempting to conceal their identity through fingerprint mutilation -- defacing the skin of their fingertips.

Earlier this month, federal prosecutors in Massachusetts charged three men in a conspiracy to "help illegal aliens evade detection through the mutilation or surgical removal of their fingerprints," according to a release from the U.S. attorney's office.

One of the accused, Jose Elias Zaiter-Pou, a doctor originally from the Dominican Republic, allegedly performed the procedure on patients for a fee \$4,500.

According to Stephen G. Fischer Jr., a spokesman for the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services, whose department receives approximately 200,000 fingerprints daily, methods of fingerprint mutilation can vary depending on the circumstance and the criminal.

"It can go from people chewing on fingers, using a knife, burning acid or cigarettes," Fischer said. "Or if you have a career criminal or someone who is a little more affluent, they might go to a surgeon."

While no hard data on fingerprint mutilations exist, Fischer says the FBI's forensics examiners have noticed the uptick over the last few years, though the reason is unclear.

But advancements in forensics technology have made fingerprint mutilation increasingly difficult to pull off, as even severely damaged fingers will provide investigators with clues.

"We can identify prints that we couldn't 10 or 15 years ago," Fischer said. "Basically, they're going through all this pain and expense for no reason."

Massachusetts State Police Detective Lt. Kenneth Martin said he believes there's a misconception among criminals that fingerprint mutilation will pay off.

"These are people that when [authorities] do find out who they are, they're usually wanted on some serious crime," he said.

Fingerprint mutilation is hardly a new concept. Notorious 1930s bank robber John Dillinger attempted to evade identification by using acid to burn his fingertips, according to the National Museum of Crime and Punishment in the District of Columbia.

According Joe Polski, chief operations officer of the International Association for Identification, an organization with 7,000 members, fingerprint mutilation is still a rare occurrence. And while it forces forensics experts to dig deeper to identify a suspect, Polski says the fact that the fingers have been adulterated is usually pretty obvious.

"Anybody who looks at those prints knows there's something wrong," he said. "Nature just doesn't make them like that."

John Dillinger: Fingerprint Obliteration

Source: <http://www.crimemuseum.org/blog/john-dillinger-fingerprint-obliteration/>

John Dillinger (June 22, 1903–July 22, 1934) was one of the most notorious criminals of American History, and was often glorified by the American media for his daring bank heists and thrilling prison escapes. He operated in the 20's & 30's during the Great Depression Era and was idolized by many as the modern day Robin Hood because he stole from those same institutions that were capitalizing on the American people's misfortunes. Dillinger's "career" as a criminal included over 11 bank robberies throughout the Midwest, in which he stole in excess of \$300,000, and three separate jail breaks. The mystique surrounding Dillinger's exploits was so captivating that people often forgot (or turned a blind eye to the fact) that he was responsible for at least 10 murders including that of a Sheriff, the deaths of several innocent bystanders, and that he left a trail of carnage in his wake. Dillinger's activities, however, did not go unnoticed by Chief Investigator Melvin Purvis of the F.B.I., who was assigned the task of bringing Dillinger and his gang to justice. When J. Edgar Hoover and the F.B.I. named Dillinger the first Public Enemy Number One on his 31st birthday in 1934, his fame took on a new meaning, and his name and face became recognizable in every household throughout the Midwest and the rest of the country. There was even a \$10,000 reward for his capture!

Now a public figure, Dillinger turned to plastic surgery to alter his identity and evade Purvis and the rest of the law enforcement community. In those days, plastic surgery was not as common as it is today, and the medical procedures were primitive, dangerous, time-consuming and very painful. Dillinger underwent several bouts of plastic surgery, some more successful than others, but in the end he only managed to slightly alter his appearance. After one round of plastic surgery from which he was extremely disappointed to find that he still looked the same, one of the doctors suggested that he remove his fingerprints as a way to escape being detected. Dillinger liked this idea and elected to undergo the painful process of obliterating his fingerprints.

Dillinger was not the first criminal to come up with that idea. In 1933, "Handsome Jack" Klutas had attempted to file down the small ridges on his fingers, but he ultimately failed. Two of Kate "Ma" Barker's clan, Alvin "Creepy" Karpis and Ma's son Freddy, decided to remove their fingerprints as well, so they hired mob physician Joseph P. Moran to do the job. Moran was inexperienced in this procedure and repeatedly hacked and knifed at their prints until the gangsters couldn't bear any more pain, but when their fingers finally healed, the fingerprint ridges grew back to their original patterns.

Hoover was aware of this trend among criminals and he became wary of the possibility of success. He commissioned several surgeons and dermatologists to report on the likelihood of someone obliterating their fingerprints, and in 1934 they came back with their findings. Dr. Howard L. Updegraff, a member of that committee, had extensive experience in the area of fingerprint alterations and he reported that the only way to permanently obliterate a fingerprint is to graft skin from another part of the body over them. And in 1941, that's exactly what Robert Phillips did when he got a doctor to graft the skin from his chest on to the tips of his fingers. Phillips, however, was caught because the ridges surrounding the graft areas, as well as on the other joints of his fingers were used to identify him.

Dillinger seemed to have taken the road less traveled when he chose acid to burn the tips of his fingers with in late May, 1934. The procedure appeared to be successful; however, faint ridge markings were still visible on his fingertips after the full healing process, as were seen after Dillinger's death.

Many people in American history have attempted to elude the authorities by scarring or ruining their fingerprints, but forensics has been able to keep up with those criminals all the while. In fact, as Phillips found out firsthand, just ruining the tips of one's fingers does not preclude fingerprint identification. The ridges that are found on the tips of one's fingers are also found on the entire surface of the palm, and they are just as unique to an individual. Furthermore, by introducing scars onto one's fingers, it makes the identification process even easier, since the scar patterns are unique and less common to the general population.

If one thing can be learned from Dillinger and the other notorious outlaws of the Gangster Era it's that crime does not pay, and eventually criminals will be brought to justice, and not always the pretty way.

Name _____

Date _____

Period _____

Fingerprint Mutilation

PART A

Read the article “John Dillinger: Fingerprint Obliteration” and then answer the following questions using complete sentences.

(1) IN YOUR OWN WORDS, write a brief biography (3-5 sentences) of the life of John Dillinger.

(2) How did Dillinger alter his fingerprints?

(3) Did Dillinger successfully alter his fingerprints? Why or why not?

(4) According to Dr. Howard L. Updegraff, what is the only way to permanently obliterate a fingerprint?

(5) What did Robert Phillips do to alter his fingerprints?

(6) Was Phillips successful at altering his fingerprints? Why or why not?

(7) What did Alvin “Creepy” Karpis and Freddy Barker do to alter their fingerprints?

(8) Was physician Joseph P. Moran successful at altering the fingerprints? Why or why not?

PART B

Read the article “Fingerprint mutilation on the rise, but it’s practically pointless” and then answer the following questions using complete sentences.

(1) Describe 5 different ways to mutilate fingerprints.

(2) What were the 3 men in Massachusetts charged with?

(3) How much did doctor Jose Elias Zaiter-Pou allegedly charge to perform fingerprint mutilation procedures?

PART C After reading both articles, answer the question below in a minimum of 4 complete sentences. Be sure to use information from both articles to support your argument.

Massachusetts State Police Detective Lt. Kenneth Martin said he “believes there’s a misconception among criminals that fingerprint mutilation will pay off”. Do you think that fingerprint mutilation “pays off”? Why or why not?