STEVE INSKEEP, host:

It's MORNING EDITION from NPR News. Good morning. I'm Steve Inskeep.

LINDA WERTHEIMER, host:

And I'm Linda Wertheimer.

Researchers are taking a closer look at a common encounter that changes the direction of many lives. It's what happens when a police officer questions a civilian.

INSKEEP: At some point, the cop may have to make a hard judgment about whether a suspect is being truthful. The wrong call can wreck an investigation, let a guilty person go free, or send an innocent person into a nightmare. Now, experts are looking for ways to make that decision a little more scientific.

NPR's Dina Temple-Raston reports.

DINA TEMPLE-RASTON: Forget what you've learned from cops on TV. Liars do not necessarily have trouble making eye contact. The guilty don't fidget or sweat more. In fact, research shows that innocent people can be just as nervous.

(Soundbite of TV clip)

Unidentified Man: Where were you Tuesday night between 09:00 and 03:00 the next morning?

TEMPLE-RASTON: That's the TV version of the way we think most interrogations start, with the suspect on the defensive.

(Soundbite of TV clip)

Unidentified Woman: You didn't get to where you are today by being the type of person who makes mistakes. It would be a mistake not to tell me what happened.

Mr. KEVIN COLWELL (Forensic Scientist, Southern Connecticut State University): A lot of different signs of anxiety are mistaken for signs of deception.

TEMPLE-RASTON: Kevin Colwell is a forensic scientist at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven.

Mr. COLWELL: Interrogation, the whole goal is to convince somebody, or trick them or coerce them, whenever it takes, to get them to confess to the crime.

TEMPLE-RASTON: Colwell has been trying to get interrogators to change that mindset, to see these encounters as opportunities to get information that might solve the crime, rather than an occasion to elicit a confession.

Mr. COLWELL: The idea is you are convinced that that's the person who did it, and so you are no longer searching for other answers.

TEMPLE-RASTON: Colwell and a forensic psychologist named Cheryl Hiscock-Anisman are at the forefront of this kind of interview research. And they have been taking their theories out into the field. A few weeks ago, they sat down with the San Diego Police Department. Sergeant Romeo De Los Reyes was part of that group.

Sergeant ROMEO DE LOS REYES (San Diego Police Department): We've always learned that communication is 60 to 90 percent nonverbal. So this was a different approach to dealing with deception.

TEMPLE-RASTON: Here's how it works: Hiscock-Anisman, who is at National University in California, suggests interviewers begin with a non-threatening question.

Dr. CHERYL HISCOCK-ANISMAN (National University, California): When I was living in Texas, and I was running inmates for one of my studies, we asked them: What was the first day like for you in prison?

TEMPLE-RASTON: She says she chose that question for two reasons. The first was that it was a vivid memory; the second was that it was a very likely to get a truthful answer.

Dr. HISCOCK-ANISMAN: There's no need to lie about your first day in prison, even if you're an inmate.

TEMPLE-RASTON: That first question gives interviewers a baseline. It tells them how much detail someone provides when they are telling a story truthfully. Next, they ask a person to tell them about the event being investigated. Interviewers then compare the two stories. Do they use the same number of descriptive phrases? Do they remember the same level of detail? Then comes the harder question.

Dr. HISCOCK-ANISMAN: Then I'd say, now what I want you to do is, I want you to go back to that time, and I want you to describe every single thing that happened, but this time I want you to tell me what happened last and work all the way backwards.

TEMPLE-RASTON: And can they usually do that or do they stumble?

Dr. HISCOCK-ANISMAN: Well, a liar is going to have a hell of a time.

(Soundbite of laughter)

TEMPLE-RASTON: Try this on your teenager next time they come home late. The point is an honest person can pass this test. In fact, Hiscock-Anisman says she's found they tend to add about 30 percent more detail than people who are lying. That said, there are still practical questions on how law enforcement might use this research. Sergeant De Los Reyes of San Diego says he can see how the system might work with someone who has decided to talk, but what about someone who doesn't want to cooperate? Even so, the San Diego Police Department has asked the researchers back. They want to do more training.

Dina Temple-Raston, NPR News.