

The National Registry
of
EXONERATIONS
ANNUAL REPORT

March 31, 2020

A project of the Newkirk Center for Science & Society at the
University of California Irvine, the University of Michigan
Law School & Michigan State University College of Law

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Major Themes

Years Lost to Wrongful Imprisonment

Last year saw a record number of years lost to prison by defendants exonerated for crimes they did not commit—1,908 years in total for [143](#) exonerations, an average of 13.3 years lost per exoneree.

Official Misconduct

Official misconduct occurred in at least [93](#) exonerations in 2019. [Fifty-five](#) murder cases—75% of murder exonerations in 2019—were marred by official misconduct.

The Importance of Professional Exonerators

Professional exonerators—Innocence Organizations (IOs) and Conviction Integrity Units (CIUs) played essential roles in 87 exonerations, 61% of the total. IOs took part in [67](#) exonerations, and CIUs helped secure [55](#) exonerations. IOs and CIUs worked together on 35 exonerations in 2019.

The Cases

The [143](#) exonerations that occurred in 2019 were distributed as follows:

Crimes

- 76** **Homicide:** Seventy-six defendants, a majority of all exonerees, were exonerated of homicide—[73](#) for murder and [three](#) for manslaughter.
- 21** **Sexual Assault:** Twenty-one defendants were exonerated of sex crimes, including [10](#) for child sexual abuse and [11](#) for sexual assault of an adult.
- 20** **Other Violent Crimes:** Twenty defendants were exonerated of convictions for other violent crimes, such as assault, robbery, and attempted murder.
- 26** **Non-Violent Crimes:** Twenty-six defendants were exonerated of non-violent offenses—[19](#) for drug crimes, and seven for other crimes, such as conspiracy, theft, and failure to register as a sex offender.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Contributing Factors

- 93** **Official Misconduct:** We know of official misconduct in [93](#) exonerations in 2019, almost two-thirds of the cases, including [55](#) murder cases—75% of murder exonerations in 2019.
- 48** **Mistaken Witness Identification:** [Forty-eight](#) exonerations in 2019 were for convictions based at least in part on mistaken witness identifications.
- 24** **False Confessions:** [Twenty-four](#) exonerations involved false confessions.
- 101** **Perjury or False Accusation:** [One hundred and one](#) cases included perjury or other false accusations.
- 24** **False or Misleading Forensic Evidence:** [Twenty-four](#) cases involved forensic evidence that was false or misleading.

Professional Exonerators

- 55** **Conviction Integrity Units (CIUs)** are divisions of prosecutorial offices that work to prevent, identify, and correct false convictions. There were [59](#) CIUs in the United States in 2019, four times the number of just five years earlier. [Fifty-five](#) CIU exonerations took place in 2019.
- 67** **Innocence Organizations (IOs)**—non-governmental organizations dedicated to helping secure exonerations of wrongfully convicted defendants—represented defendants in [67](#) exonerations.
- 87** **All Together**, CIUs and IOs participated in 87 of the 143 exonerations that we know occurred in 2019.
- 35** **CIUs and IOs worked in cooperation** on 35 of those 87 exonerations—more than half of all exonerations by IOs in 2019, and almost two-thirds of exonerations by CIUs.



Exonerations in 2019

March 31, 2020

The National Registry of Exonerations recorded [143](#) exonerations that occurred in 2019.

All told, the National Registry of Exonerations has recorded **2,556** exonerations that occurred in the United States from 1989 through the end of 2019.

The 2019 exonerations included:

- One hundred and seventeen exonerations of **Violent Felonies**, including 76 homicides, [10](#) child sex abuse convictions, and [11](#) sexual assaults on adults. [Three](#) of the homicide exonerees had been sentenced to death;
- [Nineteen](#) exonerations were for **Drug Crimes**;
- [Seventeen](#) exonerations were based in whole or in part on **DNA evidence**;
- [Fifty](#) exonerations were for convictions in which **No Crime** was actually committed;
- [Ninety-three](#) exonerations included **Misconduct by Government Officials**;
- [Thirty-four](#) exonerations were for convictions based on **Guilty Pleas**;
- [Forty-eight](#) exonerations involved **Mistaken Witness Identifications**;
- [Twenty-four](#) exonerations involved **False Confessions**;
- [One hundred and one](#) exonerations included **Perjury or False Accusation**; and
- Eighty-seven exonerations were the result of work by prosecutorial **Conviction Integrity Units** or **Innocence Organizations**.

Part I of this report describes **basic patterns** across all [143](#) known exonerations in 2019. **Part II** discusses the cases of some of the longest-serving exonerees in the Registry and highlights cases of injustice that otherwise received little or no attention. Finally, **Part III** discusses the important role Conviction Integrity Units and Innocence Organizations continue to play in exonerations.

BASIC PATTERNS

I. Basic Patterns

- **Exonerations by Jurisdiction.** There were [143](#) exonerations in 34 states and the District of Columbia in 2019. Illinois had the most exonerations by far—[30](#)—with [Pennsylvania](#) and [Texas](#) tied for second with 15, followed by New York ([11](#)) and Michigan ([9](#)). See Table 1 for a complete list ranked by the number of exonerations in 2019.

Table 1: Exonerations in 2019 by Jurisdiction

Illinois— 30	North Carolina— 4	Arkansas— 1	Ohio— 1
Pennsylvania— 15	Louisiana— 3	Colorado— 1	Oregon— 1
Texas— 15	Massachusetts— 3	Hawaii— 1	South Carolina— 1
New York— 11	Connecticut— 2	Idaho— 1	South Dakota— 1
Michigan— 9	Georgia— 2	Maine— 1	Tennessee— 1
California— 7	Indiana— 2	Minnesota— 1	Vermont— 1
Florida— 6	Oklahoma— 2	Missouri— 1	Virginia— 1
Maryland— 6	Utah— 2	New Hampshire— 1	District of Columbia— 1
Kentucky— 5	Washington— 2	New Mexico— 1	

One reason for the high number of exonerations in Illinois was the inclusion of 14 exonerees from a large group of drug-crime exonerations in Chicago, in the aftermath of a scandal involving corrupt police officers led by Sgt. Ronald Watts, who planted drugs on people after they refused to pay when the officers attempted to extort money from them.

- **The Crimes for which the Defendants Were Convicted.** Most exonerations in 2019 were for violent crimes (117/143), especially homicide (53%) and sexual assault (15%). Drug crimes accounted for 73% of the non-violent cases (19/26). See Table 2 for a breakdown of exonerations by crime.

Table 2: Exonerations in 2019 by Crime

Homicide	76	(53%)
Murder	73	
Manslaughter	3	
Sexual Assaults	21	(15%)
Sexual assault on an adult	11	
Child sex abuse	10	
Other Violent Crimes	20	(14%)
Robbery	7	
Attempted Murder	6	
Assault	4	
Other violent misdemeanor	2	
Burglary or Unlawful entry	1	
Non-Violent Crimes	26	(18%)
Drug crimes	19	
Conspiracy	2	
Sex-offender registration	2	
Theft	1	
Weapons possession-sale	1	
Escape	1	
Total	143	

- **Length of Incarceration.** Defendants exonerated in 2019 spent an average of 13.3 years incarcerated for their convictions, for a record total of 1,908 years lost. Three of the five longest-serving exonerees in the Registry were exonerated in 2019. These figures underestimate the actual amount of time lost; they do not include the often substantial time—sometimes several years—these exonerees spent in jail awaiting trial.
- **DNA Exonerations.** [Seventeen](#) exonerations in 2019 were based in whole or in part on post-conviction DNA testing, about 12% of the total. Overall, DNA exonerations now account for just under 20% of the exonerations in the Registry through 2019 (504/2,556). In 2019, 76% of the DNA exonerations were homicide cases (13/17), and [four](#) were for sexual assault.

BASIC PATTERNS

- **Official Misconduct.** [Ninety-three](#) exonerations in 2019 involved official misconduct. [Official Misconduct](#) encompasses a wide range of behavior—from police officers threatening witnesses, to forensic analysts falsifying test results, to prosecutors hiding evidence of innocence.
- **False Confessions.** [Twenty-four](#) cases involved false confessions; all but six were exonerations from convictions for homicide. [Three](#) exonerees falsely confessed to murder and rape, and ultimately took a plea deal that allowed them to plead guilty to sexual assault. [Two](#) exonerees falsely confessed to arson and related crimes, but ultimately pled guilty to conspiracy to commit arson. In [one case](#), the exoneree falsely confessed to sexual assault following an interrogation that occurred after he had taken medication that affected his ability to understand what was happening.
- **No-Crime Cases.** [Fifty](#) exonerations in 2019 were cases in which we now know that no crime even occurred. The largest group of no-crime exonerations involved drug crimes in which police planted drugs ([18/50](#)), but [seven](#) child sex abuse exonerations, [five](#) sexual assaults exonerations, and seven homicide exonerations were also no-crime cases ([five](#) murder and [two](#) manslaughter). The remaining 13 included exonerations for crimes such as [sex offender registration violations](#), [weapons offenses](#), [robbery](#), and [assault](#).
- **Perjury or False Accusation.** [One hundred and one](#) exonerations included witnesses who committed perjury or otherwise falsely accused the defendant, including [57](#) murders, [eight](#) cases of child sex abuse, [eight](#) sexual assaults, and [17](#) drug crimes. The remaining cases covered a range of charges, including robbery, burglary, and attempted murder. In [39](#) of the 101 cases, the exoneree was falsely accused of a crime that never occurred. Of those, [14](#) were cases involving the Sgt. Watts scandal in Chicago.
- **Mistaken Witness Identification.** [Forty-eight](#) cases included mistaken witness identification, 12 of which involved cross-racial identification, a significant risk factor for misidentification. Thirty-three of the 48 involved [murder](#), [attempted murder](#), or [manslaughter](#). [Six](#) involved sexual assault, [six](#) involved robbery, [one](#) involved child sex abuse, [one](#) involved drug possession, and [one](#) was for burglary/unlawful entry.
- **False or Misleading Forensic Evidence.** [Twenty-four](#) cases involved false or misleading forensic evidence. Sixteen were for [murder](#) or [manslaughter](#). [Three](#) involved child sexual abuse and [one](#) involved sexual assault of an adult. [Two](#) conspiracy convictions were tainted by forensic error in underlying arson charges. [One](#) involved a drug conviction, and [one](#) a robbery.
- **Conviction Integrity Units (CIUs)** in 13 counties were involved in [55](#) exonerations in 2019. Fourteen of the CIU exonerations in 2019 arose from the scandal involving corrupt officers in Cook County, Illinois (Chicago)—all for drug crimes. In all but [one](#) of these cases, the exoneree pled guilty. Three additional CIU exonerations in 2019 were for drug crimes, and in [one](#) the exoneree pled guilty. Thirty-two were for [murder](#) or [attempted murder](#), [four](#) for robbery, [one](#) for sexual assault, and [one](#) for child sexual abuse.
- **Innocence Organizations (IOs)** were involved in [67](#) exonerations in 2019. Overall, the Registry lists 610 exonerations from 1989 through 2019 in which IOs took part.

NOTABLE DEVELOPMENTS

II. Notable Developments in 2019

Record Time Lost and Invisible Injustice

Last year saw both a record in total number of years lost to prison by defendants exonerated in a single year and the average number of years lost per exoneree: 1,908 years total, a record of 13.3 years lost per exoneree.

The total years that all defendants exonerated since 1989 lost in prison for crimes they did not commit surpassed 22,000 in 2019, an average of nine years in prison for each of the more than 2,500 exonerees.¹

Of the [52](#) people in the Registry who served more than 30 years in prison for crimes they did not commit, 10 were exonerated in 2019. Two of these 10 long-serving exonerees were sentenced to death, and eight were sentenced to life in prison, three of them without the possibility of parole. Only [one](#) was exonerated based on testing of DNA evidence. The rest did not have the benefit of DNA testing, either because no biological material existed to test or whatever was collected had been lost in the years since their convictions. As arduous as the process is for any falsely convicted defendant, the odds are especially stacked against those who were convicted decades ago.

Three of the five longest-serving defendants in the Registry were exonerated in 2019. [Charles Finch](#) was sentenced to death in 1976 and spent almost 43 years in a North Carolina prison for a murder that he did not commit. In Florida, [Clifford Williams Jr.](#) was also sentenced to death in 1976, along with his nephew [Hubert "Nathan" Myers](#), who was sentenced to life in prison for a murder they did not commit.

The time these exonerees lost is staggering. Young men when they entered prison, they are now senior citizens. Two started their long sentences on death row.

But even those exonerees who did not spend decades in prison suffered terribly. Often those relatively minor or long past miscarriages of justice go largely unnoticed, adding insult to injury.

Consider the case of [Lee Arthur Hester](#). On May 1, 2019, 72-year-old Hester was exonerated of the 1961 murder of a Chicago elementary school teacher that took place when Hester was 14 years old. The dismissal of the charges came nearly 58 years after he was convicted based on weak and problematic forensics, and a false confession coerced by Chicago police. The shocking nature of the crime—the sexual assault and murder of a teacher in a school—resulted in extensive and racially charged coverage by the media in 1961.

In contrast to the media coverage at the time of the crime, as far as we know, only the Registry reported Hester's exoneration. Hester had been released on parole in 1972; he is not

¹ For the most current information on time lost by exonerees, see our [interactive display](#).

NOTABLE DEVELOPMENTS

among the Registry's longest serving exonerees. But his ordeal is unimaginable. He may have been out of prison, but he had to live as a convicted murderer for nearly 60 years before his name was cleared. Such a travesty of justice should have attracted more attention, but, like that of many exonerees, the injustice he suffered stayed largely under the radar.

Hester's case was sensational when he was convicted, but with the passage of time it faded from the public's memory and his exoneration attracted little attention. Most cases that receive little or no attention are on the other end of the spectrum—exonerations from convictions for mundane crimes such as drug possession that nevertheless had profound consequences for the exonerees.

The near invisibility of these injustices—some due to the passage of time, others for the run-of-the-mill nature of the crime—is troubling. Each exoneree experienced a profound, life-altering injustice and was overlooked, either languishing in prison for decades or dealing with the aftermath of an unjust conviction.

PROFESSIONAL EXONERATORS

III. The Continued Importance of Professional Exonerators

A [Conviction Integrity Unit](#) (CIU) is a division of a prosecutorial office that works to prevent, identify, and remedy false convictions. An [Innocence Organization](#) (IO) is a non-governmental organization dedicated to investigating and remedying wrongful convictions. Both were extensively involved with exonerations in 2019, often cooperatively.

● Cooperation between CIUs and IOs

CIUs were involved in [55](#) exonerations in 2019, and IOs were involved in [67](#). An IO, a CIU, or both were involved in 87 exonerations—60% of the total. We are aware of only one new IO that opened in 2019², but there were [several new CIUs](#).³

In earlier reports, we discussed a trend in which IOs work with CIUs in securing exonerations. In 2019, we saw more of this cooperation: IOs and CIUs cooperated in 35 exonerations.

² The Tennessee Innocence Project launched in early 2019.

³ Orange Co., CA; Contra Costa Co., CA; Arapahoe Co., CO; 17th Judicial Circuit, FL; Fulton Co., GA; Wyandotte Co., KS; Michigan (statewide); St. Louis City, MO; St. Louis Co., MO; New Jersey (statewide); Monroe Co., NY; Ulster Co., NY; Queens Co., NY; Summit Co., OH.

IOs play an essential role in many exonerations. Securing representation from an IO is often a falsely convicted defendant’s best hope to establish innocence. Unlike CIUs, however, IOs must usually reinvestigate convictions from scratch with no authority to subpoena witnesses or documents, or to test physical evidence. And, of course, they lack the power to remedy wrongful convictions directly.

CIUs, by contrast, are run by prosecutors—some of them with significant prior experience in criminal defense—who do have that power. If an IO can present a compelling case of innocence to a CIU, the chances of an exoneration are much better. As the number of CIUs increases, we expect to see more exonerations secured by cooperation between IOs and CIUs.

● **Conviction Integrity Units**

We know of 59 CIUs in operation by the end of 2019⁴, 15 more than the 44 we listed [last year](#).

Figure 1: CIUs in Operation

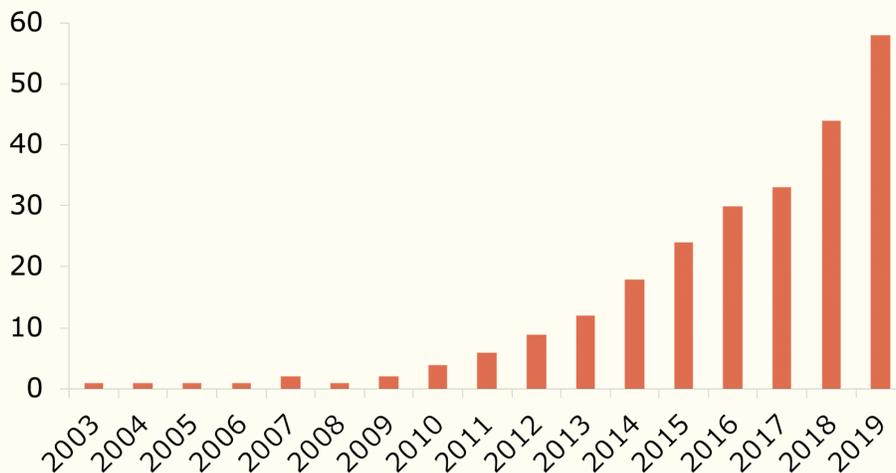


Figure 1 depicts the number of CIUs in operation by year since 2002. In prior reports, we predicted that CIUs would become increasingly common, but we did not anticipate the speed at which they proliferated. For instance, before 2018, there was not a single CIU in Florida, even though Florida had 64 pre-2018 exonerations, including 8 defendants who had been sentenced to death. In 2018, three of Florida’s 20 State Attorneys opened CIUs, and each of those CIUs has at least one staff person dedicated full time to conviction integrity. In 2019, another Florida State Attorney started the process of opening a CIU.

In addition, a new model for CIUs emerged in 2019. The attorneys general of Michigan and New Jersey opened statewide CIUs (and Pennsylvania’s attorney general launched one in early 2020). It is too early to tell how these statewide CIUs will compare with county units, but there are reasons to be optimistic.

⁴ We don’t count a CIU in Orleans Parish, Louisiana that opened in 2014, but shut down two years later. In addition, Pennsylvania’s attorney general launched a statewide CIU in the first few months of 2020.

PROFESSIONAL EXONERATORS

With a few exceptions, local CIUs are concentrated in large metropolitan areas. Larger offices are likely to have the resources needed to dedicate staff to reinvestigating old convictions. A statewide office should be better equipped to provide the resources and expertise that smaller counties lack. Moreover, depending on how these statewide CIUs are structured, reinvestigation by a separate office can allow for greater objectivity in reviewing the integrity of the conviction. A distinct, independent unit in a county-level CIU serves that same function, but that structure is not feasible in many smaller offices.

This report, like previous ones, includes a table that lists of all the CIUs in operation in the country for which we have information. The table includes information on their structures, accessibility to the general public, and the number of exonerations they helped produce.⁵ We also maintain a [list](#) to track CIU exonerations, as well as new CIUs as they open.

CIUs vary in structure and resources, making it difficult to assess their relative effectiveness in remedying false convictions. But one measure of their impact is the number of exonerations they help secure. By that measure, CIUs clearly continue to play a major role in exonerations. They helped secure 38% ([55/143](#)) of those that occurred in 2019.

The majority ([30/55](#)) of CIU-involved exonerations in 2019 were in murder cases. Almost one-third were for drug convictions ([17/55](#)), 14 of which stemmed from the Sgt. Watts scandal in Chicago, which was also a major issue discussed in last year's [report](#). The remaining CIU exonerations involved [four](#) robberies, [two](#) attempted murders, [one](#) child sex abuse case, and [one](#) sexual assault.

The leadership in a prosecutorial office clearly plays an important role in how many exonerations a CIU produces. Philadelphia has had a CIU since 2014, but it has become significantly more active since 2018, when Larry Krasner became the district attorney, restructured the unit, and appointed an attorney with significant defense experience to run it. In the two years since, the Philadelphia CIU has been involved in 12 exonerations, compared to only three in the unit's first four years of operation.

There are other examples of highly active CIUs. In last year's report, we highlighted the CIU in Wayne County, Michigan (Detroit), which opened in 2018. As is the case in Philadelphia, the attorney who runs the unit is a former defense attorney. In just its first year of operation, the Wayne CIU had already produced [four](#) exonerations (all murders). In 2019, it played a role in [seven](#) ([three](#) murders, [two](#) robberies, [one](#) child sex abuse, and [one](#) attempted murder). Five other CIUs had multiple exonerations in 2019—[five](#) in Baltimore, [four](#) in Dallas, [three](#) in Kings County (Brooklyn), and [two](#) in the 4th Circuit, Florida (which includes Jacksonville)—but among those, only the 4th Circuit had been in operation fewer than seven years.

The number of exonerations a CIU produces cannot tell the whole story, but it tells us something important about a CIU's commitment to its mission of uncovering and remedying wrongful convictions. Some CIUs in large metropolitan areas have few exonerations after years in operation. A dearth of exonerations could in theory be evidence of a highly accurate adjudication process stretching back 20 or 30 years that produced few false convictions, but that is implausible. Rather, the number of exonerations a CIU helps secure is primarily a function of its structure and the resources the prosecutor's office is willing to devote to its work, and its willingness to acknowledge past mistakes.

⁵ We are not, of course, privy to the internal decision-making in prosecutors' offices, but we contacted all CIUs in counties that have had exonerations to ask which ones they "helped secure." We also asked about their structure, including how each prosecutorial office allocates resources to its CIU.

Conclusion

This report provides a snapshot of exonerations in 2019. Taking a bird's eye view of all the Registry's data spanning 30 years—several patterns become evident.

- Professional exonerators—CIUs and IOs—play an increasingly critical role in remedying false convictions. That CIUs in particular have proliferated does not surprise us, but the rate at which they are doing so has exceeded our expectations.
- While exonerations of defendants convicted of relatively minor crimes such as drugs or weapons offenses are not uncommon, most exonerations involve extremely serious offenses and harsh sentences.
- The people who were wrongly convicted and exonerated in 2019 spent a staggering number of years in prison—a record of 1,908 years in total, on average 13.3 years lost per exoneree.
- Their cases were often marred by the types of errors we have become all too accustomed to seeing—misconduct by police and prosecutors, sloppy or fraudulent handling of forensic evidence, perjury and other false accusations, and mistaken witness identifications. While these are perhaps not entirely preventable, surely more can and should be done to minimize the impact of these costly errors.

2019 ILLUSTRATIVE CASES



Lee Arthur Hester

STATE Illinois

CRIME Murder

CONVICTED 1961

EXONERATED 2019

KEY FACTORS False Confession, False or Misleading Forensic Evidence, Perjury or False Accusation, Official Misconduct

On May 1, 2019, 72-year-old Lee Arthur Hester was exonerated of the 1961 murder of a Chicago elementary school teacher. At the time, he was just 14 years old, and the crime shocked Chicago. The dismissal of the charges came nearly 58 years after he was convicted based on faulty forensics and a false confession coerced by Chicago police.

The exoneration was the result of several years of investigation by the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University's Pritzker School of Law and a review by the Cook County State's Attorney's Office Conviction Integrity Unit.

On January 10, 2020, Hester was granted a certificate of innocence in Cook County Circuit Court, paving the way for him to seek compensation from the state of Illinois.

He was convicted of the murder of Josephine Keane, a 45-year-old master teacher at Lewis-Champlin Elementary School in the Englewood neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago.

Steven Drizin, a Northwestern law professor and expert on false confessions who led the re-investigation of Hester's case, published a detailed account of the case in 2011 in the *Northwestern Journal of Law and Social Policy*. The article described Hester's trial as "a highly contested affair which involved a battle of the experts with regard to the physical and scientific evidence in the case and a swearing contest between Hester and the interrogating officers with regard to the confession." Drizin also noted that the case was a "cauldron of racial tension which boiled over at times."

Hester was convicted of murder as an adult and sentenced to 55 years in prison. He was released on parole in 1972. Hester's legal team presented a motion to vacate the conviction noting that the Conviction Integrity Unit had concluded that Hester's confession "was not a reliable piece of evidence...the statement was taken under circumstances that, if they arose today, almost certainly would have resulted in the suppression of the statement."

The review showed the confession was contradicted "in almost every material respect by the physical evidence in the case" and the expert testimony about blood hair and other materials "is no longer considered to be scientifically reliable" and was "inaccurate, misleading or based on flawed methodologies." The 58-year gap between Hester's conviction and his exoneration is the longest of all exonerations in the National Registry of Exonerations.



Hassan Bennett

STATE Pennsylvania

CRIME Second-Degree Murder

CONVICTED 2008

EXONERATED 2019

KEY FACTORS Perjury or False Accusation, Official Misconduct, Inadequate Legal Defense

After an initial mistrial, Hassan Bennett of Philadelphia was convicted in December 2008 of second-degree murder in the shooting death of Devon English. Following his conviction, he was housed at the same prison with his co-defendant, who had testified against Bennett as part of a plea deal. The man now said that Bennett wasn't involved.

Bennett appealed his conviction, unsuccessfully, then in 2014 sought a new trial under Pennsylvania's Post-Conviction Relief Act. During that process, Bennett fired his appellate attorney and drafted his own motion that said his trial attorney, who had died in 2009, had been ineffective by failing to follow up on evidence and testimony that bolstered Bennett's claims of innocence. This included cellphone records, arrest records that impeached prosecution witnesses, and even a drug-test that showed Bennett wasn't smoking marijuana at the time of the shooting, as a state's witness had testified.

In addition, the harsh investigative tactics of one of the police officers involved in the case had come under scrutiny. Bennett was granted a new trial in 2017. At the retrial in 2018, he represented himself, appearing before the jury in jail scrubs. The jury deadlocked, with the majority voting for acquittal. Bennett also represented himself at his fourth trial in 2019. The jury acquitted him after only 81 minutes of deliberation.



Gary Cifizzari

STATE Massachusetts

CRIME First-Degree Murder

CONVICTED 1984

EXONERATED 2019

KEY FACTORS False Confession, False or Misleading Forensic Evidence, Perjury or False Accusation, Inadequate Legal Defense

Gary Cifizzari was convicted in 1984 of the brutal murder in the death of his aunt, Concetta Schiappa, in Milford, Massachusetts in 1979.

After the initial investigation ran cold, Cifizzari became a suspect in 1981 when his brother, Michael, who had severe psychiatric problems, told police that they were involved with the death. As part of the investigation, police made molds of what appeared to be bitemarks on Schiappa's body. Several forensic odontologists compared those bruises with dental impressions taken from Cifizzari's mouth, and they concluded that Cifizzari had left the bitemarks.

At trial, Cifizzari's attorney didn't pursue alternate suspects or rigorously challenge the forensic evidence. He was convicted of first-degree murder in 1984 and sentenced to life in prison. Michael Cifizzari had been convicted of second-degree murder in 1983 and died in prison in 2000.

In 2017, Cifizzari's attorneys with the New England Innocence Project had DNA testing done on several pieces of evidence. Cifizzari was excluded as a contributor. Later analysis said the DNA results matched the profile of a man named Michael Giroux, an initial suspect who had died in 2014. Separately, in the years since Cifizzari's conviction, forensic odontology had been discredited as a tool for making identifications. In a motion for a new trial filed in 2019, Cifizzari's attorneys said the analysis done for his trial was wrong, with mistakes caused by bad science and confirmation bias. Cifizzari's conviction was stayed on July 12, 2019, and the charges were dismissed on December 10, 2019.



Hubert Myers & Clifford Williams Jr.

STATE Florida

CRIME Murder

CONVICTED 1976

EXONERATED 2019

KEY FACTORS Mistaken Witness ID, Official Misconduct, Inadequate Legal Defense

Clifford Williams Jr. and his nephew, Hubert Myers, spent 42 years and 7 months in prison after they were convicted of murdering a woman and wounding another in 1976. They were exonerated in 2019 following an investigation by the Conviction Integrity Unit of the State Attorney's Office for Florida's Fourth Judicial Circuit.

They were convicted after a two-day trial. The surviving victim testified that Myers and Williams, each armed with a handgun, entered their bedroom and wounded her and killed her partner. Myers was sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole after 25 years. Williams was sentenced to death, but in 1980, the Florida Supreme Court modified the sentence to life with the possibility of parole after 25 years.

Their defense attorneys failed to call alibi witnesses or point out that neither man had gunshot residue on them, that holes in the window screens and broken glass on the bed indicated the shots were fired from outside the bedroom, or that there was no evidence that two guns were involved—as the surviving witness claimed.

In 2017, Myers read a newspaper article about the formation of the Conviction Integrity Unit. He wrote to State Attorney Melissa Nelson, asserting his and his uncle's innocence was based on four key points: First, the numerous alibi witnesses who had not been called at trial; second, the results of the gunshot residue tests; third, the gunshot residue on the window frame and other forensic evidence suggesting the shooting had come from outside the bedroom; and fourth, the insufficiency of the surviving victim's testimony.

In a follow-up letter, Myers included a copy of the ballistics report and a surprising piece of new evidence: A man named Nathaniel Lawson had confessed to the crime before he died in 1994.

On March 29, 2019, Myers, 61, and Williams, 76, were released. Only three exonerees spent more time incarcerated before exoneration. Myers and Williams both received \$2 million in state compensation in 2020.



Alfred Chestnut, Andrew Stewart Jr. & Ransom Watkins

STATE Maryland

CRIME Murder

CONVICTED 1984

EXONERATED 2019

KEY FACTORS Perjury or False Accusation, Official Misconduct

Alfred Chestnut, Andrew Stewart Jr., and Ransom Watkins were 16 years old when they were charged with the murder of 14-year-old DeWitt Duckett in the hallway of his Baltimore, Maryland junior high school in 1983. They were accused of killing him to get his Georgetown University Starter jacket.

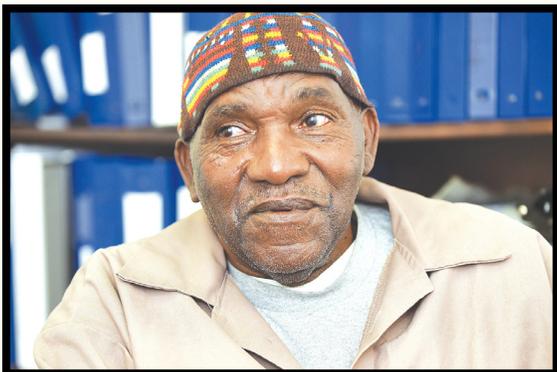
They were convicted on the testimony of students at the school who said they saw the three confront Duckett and shoot him. All three were sentenced to life in prison.

In 2018, Chestnut filed a public records request with the Maryland Attorney General's Office and received Baltimore police reports that had not been disclosed to the defense prior to the defendants' trial. The reports showed that there were several students who identified the shooter as Michael Willis, that a fourth student's identification was the sole foundation connecting the three defendants to the crime, and that there was an unexplained shift in the investigation from one perpetrator to three. In addition, the notes revealed that anonymous calls implicated Willis as the gunman, that witnesses told officers that Willis was later seen wearing DeWitt's jacket, and that Willis had admitted he shot DeWitt.

In 2019, Chestnut wrote to the Conviction Integrity Unit at the Baltimore City District Attorney's Office asking that their cases be re-investigated based on the documents that he had obtained.

During a review of the case, the witnesses all recanted their identifications of Chestnut, Watkins, and Stewart, and all said the police had heavily coached them.

When they were released after more than 35 years in prison, Baltimore City State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby said, "These three men were convicted, as children, because of police and prosecutorial misconduct. What the state, my office, did to them is wrong. They deserve so much more than an apology. We owe them real compensation—and I plan to fight for it." In March 2020, the state of Maryland awarded Chestnut, Stewart, and Watkins each \$2.8 million in compensation.



Charles Finch

STATE North Carolina

CRIME Murder

CONVICTED 1976

EXONERATED 2019

KEY FACTORS Mistaken Witness ID, False or Misleading Forensic Evidence, Perjury or False Accusation, Official Misconduct

In 1976, 38-year-old Charles Finch was sentenced to death for the murder of a convenience store owner in Wilson, North Carolina despite the testimony of witnesses that he was playing poker in Tom Smith's Shoeshine Parlor at the time of the crime. His conviction was based primarily on an eyewitness whose description of Finch as one of three men involved in the crime progressively moved from vague to positive by the time of trial.

The prosecution presented testimony that pellets from a shotgun shell found in Finch's car were similar to or "just like" the pellets found in the body of the victim. The prosecution failed to disclose that the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) had examined the pellets from the shell found in Finch's car and analysts were unable to find sufficient similarities.

In 2001, attorneys at the Wrongful Conviction Clinic at Duke University School of Law began representing Finch. They were able to use a state law enacted in 1996—20 years after Finch was convicted—to obtain the SBI report as well other evidence that had never been disclosed to Finch or his attorneys.

On May 23, 2019, Judge Terence Boyle granted Finch's petition for a writ habeas corpus, vacated his conviction, dismissed his charges, and ordered him released. Finch's original death sentence had been commuted to life in prison.

After nearly 43 years in prison—the second longest incarceration of any person exonerated since 1989—Finch was released. He was 81 and in a wheelchair. "I'm just glad to be free," Finch declared. "I feel good."

Elgerie Cash & Jennifer Weathington

STATE Georgia

CRIME First-Degree Murder

CONVICTED 2013

EXONERATED 2019

KEY FACTORS False or Misleading Forensic Evidence, Inadequate Legal Defense

Elgerie Cash and her daughter, Jennifer Weathington, of Dallas, Georgia, were each charged with murder in the shooting death of Lennis Jones, Jennifer's boyfriend, on May 30, 2011.

The initial investigation pointed to an accidental shooting. Cash said she had been showing Jones a Glock pistol, and there was an argument about whether the chamber was loaded. An autopsy would show Jones was legally intoxicated at the time of the shooting. But the doctor who performed the autopsy said his examination of the head wound found no stippling of gunpowder. He said that suggested the weapon had been at least 18 inches away, an unlikely distance for an accidental suicide. Weathington and Elgerie were both charged with first-degree murder.

The women were tried together. Weathington's attorney failed to challenge the ballistics and forensic evidence. Cash's attorney did little to prepare and was a disruptive presence in the courtroom. He swore at Cash and cursed so much during the proceedings that the judge asked him to stop. Both women were convicted in 2013 and sentenced to life in prison.

They appealed their conviction, claiming ineffective assistance of counsel. Their motion was granted in 2014, and their retrial began in April 2019. The women had new attorneys who presented new evidence of innocence, including a report from a former medical examiner that contradicted the state's autopsy. On May 1, 2019, Cash and Weathington were acquitted of all charges.

CONVICTION INTEGRITY UNITS

County	State	Population	Founded	Dedicated Attorney	Application Online	Web Address	Exonerations Through 2020
Pima	AZ	1,039,073	2014	Yes	Yes	Yes	0
Alameda	CA	1,666,753	UNK	No	No	No	0
Contra Costa	CA	1,150,215	2019	No	Yes	Yes	0
Los Angeles	CA	10,105,518	2015	Yes	Yes	Yes	3
Merced	CA	274,765	2017	No	Yes	Yes	1
Nevada	CA	99,696	2017	No	No	No	0
Orange	CA	3,185,968	2019	Yes	No	No	0
Riverside	CA	2,450,758	2015	Yes	Yes	Yes	1
Sacramento	CA	1,540,975	2013	Yes	Yes	Yes	1
San Bernardino	CA	2,171,603	2016	No	Yes	Yes	0
San Diego	CA	3,343,364	2016	Yes	Yes	Yes	1
San Francisco	CA	883,305	2016	Yes	Yes	Yes	0
Santa Clara	CA	1,937,570	2002	No	No	No	6
Ventura	CA	850,967	2012	Yes	No	Yes	4
Yolo	CA	220,408	2014	No	Yes	Yes	0
Arapahoe	CO	651,215	2019	No	Yes	Yes	0
Boulder	CO	326,078	2018	No	Yes	Yes	0
District of Columbia	DC	702,455	2014	No	No	No	0
4 th Circuit	FL	1,252,085	2018	Yes	Yes	Yes	2
9 th Circuit	FL	1,748,635	2018	Yes	Yes	Yes	0
17 th Circuit	FL	1,951,260	2019	No	Yes	Yes	0
13 th Circuit	FL	1,436,888	2018	Yes	Yes	Yes	0
Fulton	GA	1,050,114	2019	Yes	Yes	Yes	0
Cook	IL	5,180,493	2012	Yes	Yes	Yes	99
Lake	IL	700,832	2013	Yes	No	Yes	3
Wyandotte	KA	165,324	2019	No	No	Yes	0
Baltimore City	MD	602,495	2012	Yes	Yes	Yes	12
Middlesex	MA	1,614,714	2013	Yes	No	Yes	1
Suffolk	MA	807,252	2012	No	No	No	1
Wayne	MI	1,753,893	2018	Yes	Yes	Yes	12
Statewide, AG	MI	9,995,915	2019	No	Yes	Yes	0
Jackson	MO	700,307	UNK	No	Yes	Yes	0
St. Louis City	MO	302,838	2019	No	No	Yes	0
St. Louis Co.	MO	996,945	2019	No	Yes	Yes	0
Statewide, AG	NJ	8,908,520	2019	No	Yes	Yes	0
Clark	NV	2,231,647	2016	Yes	Yes	No	1
Bronx	NY	1,432,132	2016	Yes	No	No	4

County	State	Population	Founded	Dedicated Attorney	Application Online	Web Address	Exonerations Through 2020
Erie	NY	919,719	2018	No	No	Yes	1
Kings	NY	2,582,830	2011	No	No	Yes	31
Monroe	NY	742,474	2019	No	No	No	0
Nassau	NY	1,358,343	2013	No	No	No	2
New York	NY	1,628,701	2010	No	No	No	12
Oneida	NY	229,577	2013	No	No	No	0
Orange	NY	381,951	2016	No	No	No	0
Putnam	NY	98,892	2016	No	No	No	1
Queens	NY	2,278,906	2019	No	No	Yes	0
Suffolk	NY	1,481,093	2018	Yes	Yes	Yes	1
Ulster	NY	178,599	2019	No	No	Yes	0
Cuyahoga	OH	1,243,857	2014	Yes	Yes	Yes	3
Summit	OH	541,918	2019	No	No	Yes	0
Multnomah	OR	811,880	2014	Yes	No	No	5
Philadelphia	PA	1,584,138	2014	No	Yes	Yes	15
Statewide AG	PA	12,807,060	2020	Yes	No	Yes	0
Davidson	TN	692,587	2016	Yes	Yes	Yes	0
Bexar	TX	1,986,049	2015	Yes	Yes	Yes	6
Dallas	TX	2,637,772	2007	Yes	No	Yes	36
Harris	TX	4,698,619	2009	Yes	Yes	Yes	141
Tarrant	TX	2,084,931	2015	Yes	Yes	Yes	1
Travis	TX	1,248,743	2017	Yes	Yes	Yes	2
Salt Lake	UT	1,152,633	2018	Yes	Yes	Yes	0
TOTAL		118,804,247					410 ²

Notes: Population: Derived from 2018 Census Estimate. Dedicated Attorney: Only listed if we could confirm (San Bernardino refused to answer; other offices did not respond). Website: We only list units with a dedicated webpage. Application: Only listed if available on the website. Does not have to be an online submission portal – the availability of the application is enough. Simply providing contact information it not.

- Florida’s district attorneys are elected by judicial circuit rather than county. The 4th Circuit includes Duval, Clay, and Nassau Counties; the 9th Circuit includes Orange and Osceola Counties; the 13th Circuit is Hillsborough County; and the 17th Circuit is Broward County.
- The total includes one exoneration from the now-defunct Orleans Parish, Louisiana, Conviction Integrity Unit (not listed).