



THE NATIONAL REGISTRY
OF EXONERATIONS

2022 ANNUAL REPORT

THE NATIONAL REGISTRY OF EXONERATIONS | MAY 8, 2023

A PROJECT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA IRVINE NEWKIRK CENTER FOR SCIENCE & SOCIETY,
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN LAW SCHOOL, AND MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF LAW

2022 ANNUAL REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MAJOR THEMES

EXONERATIONS: The Registry recorded 233 exonerations that occurred in 2022. We continue to add new and old exonerations every week, sometimes daily. The numbers in this report reflect a moment in time.

YEARS LOST TO WRONGFUL IMPRISONMENT: The 233 persons exonerated in 2022 lost an average of 9.6 years to wrongful imprisonment for crimes they did not commit—2,245 years in total.

OFFICIAL MISCONDUCT: Official misconduct occurred in at least 195 of the 233 exonerations in 2022. Sixty-three murder cases—78% of murder exonerations in 2022—were marred by official misconduct.

THE CONTINUED IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL EXONERATORS: Professional exonerators—Innocence Organizations (IOs) and Conviction Integrity Units (CIUs) continued to play essential roles. Together, they were responsible for 171 exonerations, 74% of the total. IOs took part in 160 exonerations, and CIUs helped secure 132 exonerations. IOs and CIUs worked together on 121 exonerations in 2022.

NO CRIME CASES: Of the 233 exonerations in 2022, 59% were cases in which no crime occurred. These 137 exonerations include wrongful convictions for drug possession, murder, and child sex abuse. We have additional information later in this report.

THE CASES

The National Registry of Exonerations grew by more than 300 exonerations in 2022. We recorded 233 exonerations that occurred in 2022, and we added 86 exonerations that happened in previous years. All told, the National Registry of Exonerations has recorded **3,284 exonerations** in the United States from 1989 through the writing of this report.

The 233 exonerations that occurred in 2022 included:

CRIMES

HOMICIDE: 81 defendants were exonerated of homicide—80 for murder, and one for manslaughter.

SEXUAL ASSAULT: 16 defendants were exonerated of sex crimes; four in cases where the principal crime was sexual assault of an adult, and 12 where the principal crime was child sexual abuse.

OTHER VIOLENT CRIMES: 20 defendants were exonerated of convictions for violent crimes other than homicide or sexual assault, such as assault, robbery, and attempted murder.

NON-VIOLENT CRIMES: 116 defendants were exonerated of non-violent offenses. This is more than double last year's total of 51 defendants, and is driven by 100 wrongful convictions for drug crimes.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

OFFICIAL MISCONDUCT: We know of official misconduct in 195 or 84% of the exonerations in 2022.

MISTAKEN WITNESS IDENTIFICATION: 54 exonerations in 2022 were for convictions based at least in part on mistaken witness identifications.

FALSE CONFESSIONS: 31 exonerations involved false confessions.

PERJURY OR FALSE ACCUSATION: 184 cases included perjury or other false accusations. This continues to be the most frequent contributing factor overall.

FALSE OR MISLEADING FORENSIC EVIDENCE: 44 cases involved forensic evidence that was false or misleading.

INEFFECTIVE ASSISTANCE OF COUNSEL: 56 cases had claims that trial attorneys provided inadequate representation.

PROFESSIONAL EXONERATORS

CONVICTION INTEGRITY UNITS: CIUs are divisions of prosecutorial offices that work to prevent, identify, and correct false convictions. 132 CIU exonerations occurred in 2022.

INNOCENCE ORGANIZATIONS: IOs are organizations dedicated to helping secure exonerations of wrongfully convicted defendants. These organizations exonerated 160 men and women in 2022.

CIUs and IOs worked together in 121 of the 233 exonerations that we know occurred in 2022.

GROUP EXONERATIONS

We published six cases, representing 256 men and women, in our [Groups Registry](#). In these cases, the exonerations are tied together by a pattern of systematic official misconduct in the investigation and prosecution of these cases that undermined confidence in the defendants' convictions.

OVERVIEW

Part I of this report describes basic patterns across all 233 known exonerations in 2022. Part II examines no-crime exonerations, which have become an important part of our database. Part III features profiles of important exonerations in 2022.

EXONERATIONS IN 2022

I. BASIC PATTERNS

EXONERATIONS BY JURISDICTION

There were 228 exonerations in 26 states and the District of Columbia. There were five exonerations in cases prosecuted in federal court. For the fifth year in a row, Illinois had the most exonerations (126), accounting for more than half of the 2022 total, followed by Michigan (16), Texas (11), Louisiana (9) and New York (9).

Table 1: Exonerations in 2022 by Jurisdiction (n = 233)

Illinois — <u>126</u>	Florida — <u>3</u>	Delaware — <u>1</u>
Michigan — <u>16</u>	Indiana — <u>3</u>	District of Columbia — <u>1</u>
Texas — <u>11</u>	Massachusetts — <u>3</u>	Georgia — <u>1</u>
Louisiana — <u>9</u>	North Carolina — <u>3</u>	Kansas — <u>1</u>
New York — <u>9</u>	Wisconsin — <u>3</u>	Missouri — <u>1</u>
Ohio — <u>7</u>	Alabama — <u>2</u>	Nevada — <u>1</u>
Pennsylvania — <u>6</u>	Maryland — <u>1</u>	Oregon — <u>1</u>
Virginia — <u>6</u>	Arkansas — <u>1</u>	Rhode Island — <u>1</u>
California — <u>5</u>	Connecticut — <u>1</u>	Federal cases — <u>5</u>
Tennessee — <u>5</u>		

The vast majority of the exonerations in Illinois continued to be cases tainted by misconduct of corrupt police officers led by Chicago Police Sgt. Ronald Watts, who planted drugs or weapons on people after they refused to pay bribes. We published 97 exonerations that occurred in 2022 based on this misconduct. We also entered 25 Illinois exonerations for murder that occurred in 2022, many of them tied to [misconduct](#) by Chicago Police Detective Reynaldo Guevara. Of Michigan’s 16 exonerations, 11 were for wrongful murder convictions, second only to Illinois. We entered five cases from Tennessee, the most ever from that state. Three of the cases are from Nashville and involve the work of the Davidson County District Attorney’s Conviction Integrity Unit and the Tennessee Innocence Project.

THE CRIMES OF CONVICTION

Exonerations in 2022 were almost evenly split between violent (117/233) and nonviolent crimes (116/233). This is a departure from previous years, and it was driven by drug-possession exonerations (100/233), from Chicago and elsewhere. We entered 81 homicide exonerations, which accounted for 35% of the total and nearly 70% of violent crime exonerations that occurred in 2022. See Table 2 for a breakdown of exonerations by crime.

Table 2: Exonerations in 2022 by Crime

Violent Crimes	117 (50%)
Homicide	81 (35 %)
Murder	80
Manslaughter	1
Sex crimes	16 (7%)
Sexual assault on an adult	4
Child sex abuse	12
Other violent crimes	20 (9%)
Robbery	11
Attempted murder	4
Assault	2
Other violent	3
Non-violent crimes	116 (50%)
Drug crimes	100
Weapons possession/sale	3
Conspiracy	3
Other non-violent	10
TOTAL	233 (100%)

LENGTH OF INCARCERATION

Defendants exonerated in 2022 spent 2,245 years incarcerated for their wrongful convictions, an average of 9.6 years per exoneree. The average in 2021 was 11.5 years. The lower average in 2022 reflects in part the large number of wrongful convictions entered in 2022 for drug possession, which typically carry less severe sentences.

The Registry does not include the often substantial time—sometimes several years—that exonerees spent in jail prior to conviction. Time lost to incarceration also does not include the substantial hardships many exonerees face upon release from prison or those suffered by exonerees given non-prison sentences like probation.

The dip in average time for years lost to a wrongful conviction should not be used to mask the scope of injustice on an individual level. We entered 36 new cases of men and women who were exonerated in 2022 after [serving at least 25 years](#) in prison. This is the most entered in a single year. Two of those men, Vincent Simmons and Elvis Brooks, were in prison for more than 40 years. We now have 228 men and women in the Registry who were wrongfully imprisoned for at least 25 years.

II. NO-CRIME EXONERATIONS

KEY FINDINGS

The exoneration of Pamela Moses made national news in 2022. Moses is a political activist in Memphis, Tennessee. She was convicted in 2021 of voter fraud, for which she received a harsh six-year sentence and a tongue-lashing from a judge who criticized Moses for tricking officials. The state’s case, however, fell apart after the conviction. Moses hadn’t tried to deceive anyone. The employees who processed her voter-registration form had done an inadequate review of her request. There was no crime.

Such no-crime cases now account for more than 40% of the exonérations in our main Registry. These cases include convictions for child abuse where an alleged victim later recants and says the abuse didn’t happen, murder convictions where the deaths were accidents—such as when fires resulting in deaths were mischaracterized as arson based on misleading forensic evidence—and convictions for drug possession where corrupt police officers planted the evidence.

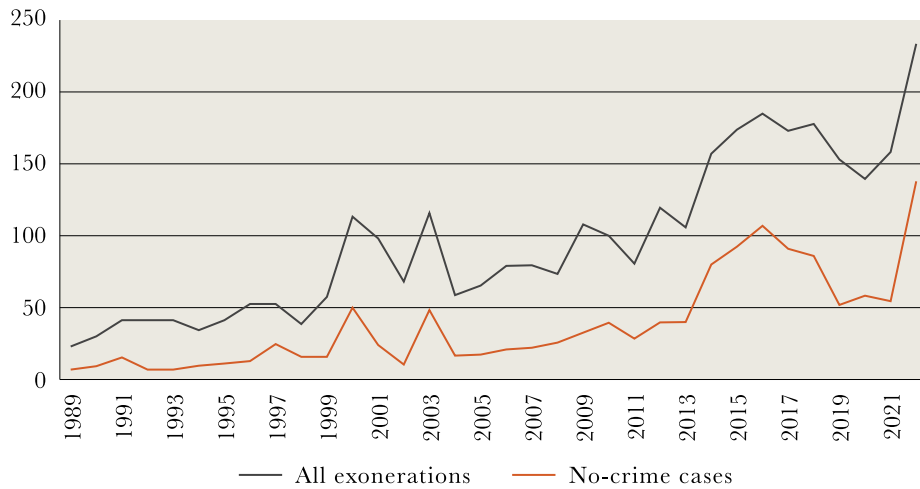
In this part of our annual report, we examine no-crime exonérations and their differences and similarities with other exonérations. Many of these figures rely on the total count of exonérations in the Registry, as of this report, as opposed to Part I which focused on exonérations that occurred in 2022.

1. Exonerations for drug-possession convictions now make up more than 40% of all no-crime exonérations, but only 18% of all exonérations.
2. Exonerations where defendants pled guilty make up 48% of no-crime exonérations, but only 25% of all exonérations.
3. The vast majority of exonérations involving charges filed on behalf of child victims—child sexual abuse, child abuse, and cases based on claims of Shaken Baby Syndrome—are no-crime cases.
4. Female exonerees are disproportionately represented in no-crime cases. They represent 16% of no-crime cases, but only 9% of all cases in the Registry.

The phenomenon of people being exonerated for crimes that didn’t happen received substantial attention in 2020, when Jessica S. Henry, a professor at Montclair State University, published *Smoke But No Fire: Convicting the Innocent of Crimes that Never Happened*. Henry’s research examined 2,468 exonérations published in the Registry as of June 30, 2019. She wrote: “Despite all that I know about wrongful convictions, I was shocked to learn that nearly one-third of all known exonérations involve people wrongfully convicted of crimes that never happened. Unlike the popular understanding of a wrongful conviction, where the wrong person was convicted of a crime committed by someone else, no-crime wrongful convictions involve innocent people convicted of crimes that did not happen in the first place.

Our database now includes nearly 3,300 exonérations, an accumulation driven in large part by no-crime cases. Of the 233 exonérations that occurred in 2022, 137, or 59%, were no-crime cases. In five of the last 10 years, no-crime cases accounted for more than half of the exonérations.

Figure 1: Exonerations From 1989–2022



What are no-crime cases? Simply put, these are cases where the exoneree was convicted of a crime that did not occur. This could include murder convictions that turned out to be cases of self-defense, convictions for drug possession where the illicit substance turned out not to be drugs, and cases where a victim later says no crime took place.

David Kingrea, who lived in Southwest Virginia, was convicted in 2014 of taking indecent liberties with the 10-year-old son of a former girlfriend, given a year in prison and required to register as a sex offender. At his trial, the prosecutor said the details the boy testified to were too embarrassing to have been made up. But they were. In 2021, the accuser, then 23 years old, recanted, saying that he falsely accused Kingrea of abuse because of Kingrea’s harsh discipline. The Virginia Court of Appeals granted Kingrea’s petition for a writ of innocence on June 6, 2022, and he received \$59,000 in state compensation in early 2023.

The frequency of no-crime cases varies widely among the types of crimes.

Table 3: No-Crime Exonerations for Selected Crimes

Crime	Total exonerations	No-crime cases	Percent of total
All crimes	3,284	1,319	40%
Murder	1,226	104	8%
Manslaughter	58	26	45%
Drug possession	585	514	88%
Sexual assault	357	90	25%
Child sex abuse	312	242	78%
Robbery	158	13	8%
Assault	116	63	54%
Weapons possession	68	53	78%
Arson	24	14	58%
Child abuse	13	12	92%

For murder, only about 8% of the exonerations are for no-crime cases. Most of these involved either self-defense claims or evidence bolstering a claim that the person died accidentally or of natural causes. This is particularly true for cases where prosecutors allege a child died because of Shaken Baby Syndrome. We have 30 of these cases in the Registry. Twenty-seven are coded as no-crime cases. In the other three, the child might have died at the hands of an adult, but not the exoneree.

A much higher percentage of manslaughter cases are no-crime cases, when compared to murder cases. While both murder and manslaughter cases are brought based on unintended deaths, manslaughter cases are more likely to fall into this category. They include traffic deaths prosecuted as crimes but post-conviction investigations revealed them to be accidents.

Among no-crime exonerations, the largest category is for drug possession. These cases make up 18% of total exonerations, but 40% of no-crime cases.

Of the 669 exonerations involving convictions for sexual assault or child sex abuse, 50% are no-crime cases. These no-crime cases have a clear difference from the larger group. For these no-crime cases, 79% of the exonerations involved child victims. For all exonerations based on convictions of these charges, child victims account for 53% of cases.

For each exoneration, the Registry lists contributing factors to the initial wrongful conviction. They are Mistaken Witness Identification (MWID), False/Misleading Forensic Evidence (FMFE), False Confession (FC), Perjury or False Accusation (PFA), Official Misconduct (OM), and Inadequate Legal Defense (ILD). The chart below shows the presence of these factors in all cases and no-crime cases.

Table 4: Contributing Factors in No-Crime Cases and All Cases

Contributing factors	No-crime exonerations	All exonerations
False/misleading forensic evidence	326 (25% of cases)	774 (24% of cases)
Perjury or false accusation	882 (67% of cases)	2,078 (63% of cases)
Official misconduct	685 (52% of cases)	1,938 (59% of cases)
Mistaken witness identification	5 (less than 1% of cases)	892 (27% of cases)
False confession	72 (5% of cases)	402 (12% of cases)
Inadequate legal defense	280 (21% of cases)	879 (28% of cases)
All cases*	1,319	3,284

*Cases can have more than one contributing factor.

No-crime cases are marred by most of the same factors that contribute to all wrongful convictions, except for mistaken witness identification. We have only five no-crime cases involving mistaken witness identification. Three of these cases are arson cases. In each exoneration, there was post-conviction evidence that refuted the state's case of an intentionally set fire and of the witness testimony about the exoneree's involvement.

Only 5% of the 1,319 no-crime exonerations involved false confessions, less than half the frequency for total cases. But even that amount raises important questions. In these cases, exonerees are not just falsely confessing to crimes they did not do. They are men and women falsely confessing to crimes that did not happen.

Jacqueline Latta and her husband, Roger Latta, were convicted of murder after their two-year-old son died in a house fire. During a 10-hour interrogation, Jacqueline Latta told a trooper with the Indiana State Police that she believed the death was her fault and she was angry. An insurance investigator later concluded the fire was arson. Latta's "confession" was used against her at trial. It was later determined that a faulty space heater likely caused the fire.

Official misconduct is less prevalent in no-crime cases, as is inadequate legal defense.

The Registry has published extensive research on the intersection between [race and wrongful convictions](#). For no-crime cases, non-white defendants make up 60% of exonerees. For all cases, non-white defendants are 67% of the total.

DRUGS AND NO-CRIME CASES

No-crime exonerations for drug possession generally take two forms. The first is that an officer planted the drugs on the defendant or falsely accused the defendant of possessing drugs. The second is that post-conviction testing showed the substances found on the exonerees weren't drugs.

As noted, 88% of the exonerations for drug crimes in the Registry are no-crime cases. While no-crime drug exonerations happen in many jurisdictions, they are clustered in several communities: Chicago, Illinois; Harris County, Texas (Houston); Swisher County, Texas; Camden, New Jersey, and Los Angeles, California. Together, they account for 84% of the 514 no-crime drug exonerations. In each of these cases, the exonerations would not have occurred without the discovery of misconduct or of breakdowns in the criminal-justice system.

Cook County has [198](#) no-crime exonerations for drug possession. All but nine are tied to misconduct by Chicago Police Sgt. Ronald Watts and his crew, who planted drugs on men and women in and around the Ida B. Wells public-housing development between 2003 and 2011.

The no-crime exonerations in Swisher County, Camden, and Los Angeles feature many of the same problems uncovered in Chicago. In the Swisher County town of Tulia, an undercover sheriff's deputy named Tom Coleman framed [35](#) defendants for drug possession. The cases unraveled after attorneys discovered Coleman had lied about his background and falsified records. The 35 men and women received pardons from Governor Rick Perry in 2003.

[Twenty-one](#) defendants were exonerated of no-crime convictions for drug possession in Camden, based on misconduct by a group of rogue officers who planted drugs and committed perjury. Sixteen of the [18](#) Los Angeles no-crime drug cases are based on misconduct by officers in the Los Angeles Police Department's Rampart division. These officers often targeted Hispanic men, planting drugs on them or falsifying reports about the circumstances of the arrests. (Ten other Rampart defendants were exonerated for weapons convictions in no-crime cases.)

In Harris County, a different problem contributed to the [160](#) no-crime exonerations. Most of these defendants were arrested based on the notoriously inaccurate field-testing of suspected drugs and then pled guilty without knowledge of the results of laboratory tests. The lab tests, which are more accurate, showed that

the substances weren't illegal, but these test results were overlooked by prosecutors and not requested by defense attorneys. Harris County now requires prosecutors to acknowledge a confirmatory lab test prior to accepting a guilty plea in a drug case.

Except for the cases from Harris County, the above no-crime drug-conviction clusters are part of our [Groups Registry](#), which uses a different lens to examine wrongful convictions. In that Registry, there is a pattern of official misconduct that connects the members of each group. The vast majority of wrongful convictions in the Groups registry are for drug possession. Many of them appear to be no-crime cases as well.

GUILTY PLEAS

Why do so many people plead guilty to crimes that later are exposed not to be crimes at all? As noted, 48% of people exonerated in these cases entered guilty pleas, compared to 25% in all exonerations.

Much of the overrepresentation of guilty pleas is due to the number of drug cases included among the no-crime exonerations. The vast majority of all drug cases are resolved by guilty pleas. In no-crime drug cases, 89% of the defendants entered guilty pleas. For all drug cases, 80% of defendants entered guilty pleas.

There are several factors at play here. Many defendants enter into plea agreements to avoid the possibility of a longer sentence if convicted at trial.

Lionel White Sr. was one of the men wrongfully convicted of a drug crime based on Sgt. Watts's misconduct in Chicago. Because of prior convictions, he was facing life in prison. He pled guilty in exchange for a five-year prison term. At his hearing, he told the judge that the officers, including Watts, were "in my house beating me ... your Honor. This is wrong. I am pleading guilty because I'm scared. That's the honest to God truth, your honor."

In Tulia, most of the defendants pled guilty after seeing what happened to the first defendants who chose to go to trial. One of those who went to trial, William Cash Love, received a sentence of 361 years in prison. Most of the other defendants who followed after Love's trial very quickly entered guilty pleas. This pattern is repeated in many no-crime drug cases. These exonerees likely knew that judges and juries tend to believe the testimony and arrest reports offered by the police.

In the Harris County cases, defendants also wanted to avoid longer prison sentences and the many months they would have to wait (typically in jail) before a trial would be held. The cases often resolved themselves within a few days after the arrest, most of them before the lab tests had been performed. And with cases completed, neither the defense nor the prosecution bothered to look at the lab test results.

The motivations for innocent defendants to plead guilty to a crime that they did not commit—and further, a crime that never occurred—are not limited to drug possession and other non-violent crimes. They extend to serious offenses as well.

John Peel, of Pinellas County, Florida, pled guilty to manslaughter to avoid a possible conviction for first-degree murder and life sentence in the death of his young son. He received a sentence of 10 years in prison. It was later determined that the child died of natural causes.

CHILD VICTIMS

The Registry contains [667](#) exonerations involving a child victim, which we define as a person under 18 years old. They represent 20% of total cases and include wrongful convictions for sexual assault, child abuse, kidnapping, and murder. Of those exonerations, 336, or 50%, are considered no-crime cases. They account for 25% of all no-crime cases.

Cases involving child victims can be extremely emotional, often pitting family members against each other or relying on forensic testimony that assumes an injury is the result of intentional harm.

The most common crime involving child victims is child sexual abuse. Of the 312 exonerations for this crime, 78% are no-crime cases. Fifty-nine of these cases were instances of “Child Sexual Abuse Hysteria,” which we define as “A case in which the exoneree was convicted of child sex abuse as part of a wave of child sex abuse prosecutions in the 1980s and 1990s based on aggressive and suggestive interviews of children who were thought to be victims.” These cases generally included bizarre and implausible claims by the supposed victims, frequently featuring satanic rituals.

In Chelan County, Washington, for example, 11 people were wrongfully convicted of child sexual assault and other crimes after a girl living in foster care with a police officer told the officer she had been sexually abused by her parents and others in the towns of Wenatchee and East Wenatchee, Washington. Twenty-one people were wrongfully convicted of similar crimes in Kern County, California. In both instances, appellate courts criticized the investigations, ruling that officers used improper interrogation techniques and disregarded evidence that undermined the allegations. In most of these cases, the children later recanted.

Most of the exonerations for these child sex hysteria cases occurred in 2000 or before. But last year, Nancy Smith and Joseph Allen, both of Lorain, Ohio, were exonerated for rape and other convictions in 1994 involving children at a Head Start program. Smith and Allen had never met before they were arrested, but five children testified against them. A relative of one of the alleged victims would later say that his mother coached the victims on how to testify against Smith and Allen. After she was exonerated, Smith said, “It took me almost 30 years for me to get justice here today.” She criticized the woman “who orchestrated this horrible, alleged crime that never happened.”

The Registry includes 244 homicide cases (either murder or manslaughter) where the victims were children. Fifty-three of those wrongful convictions, or 22%, are no-crime cases. For all exonerations involving homicides, no-crime cases account for 10% of the total. Equally important, 51 of these 53 wrongful convictions involving the death of a child were based in part on the use of false or misleading forensic evidence.

John Miller and his common-law wife, Debbie Loveless, were convicted of murder in the 1989 death of their four-year-old daughter. The couple said the girl was attacked by wild dogs. A medical examiner testified the girl’s wounds were too clean to have been made by an animal. But medical records showed this testimony was flawed; the wound analyzed by the examiner had been made by a scalpel at the hospital during treatment for her injuries.

Also included in those 53 no-crime homicide exonerations are 19 cases involving Shaken Baby Syndrome, or Abusive Head Trauma. The syndrome was first described in 1971 and is said to occur when an infant is shaken so hard that the brain rotates inside the skull, causing severe and potentially deadly brain injury, often with no external signs of harm. In 2001, the National Association of Medical Examiners published

a position paper on abusive head trauma that incorporated the theory that brain swelling, brain bleeding, and retinal hemorrhaging—a so-called “triad of symptoms”—indicated the violent shaking of a child.

The first exoneration based on a misdiagnosis of Shaken Baby Syndrome occurred in 1992. Including convictions for child abuse, we now have 30 exoneration cases where the prosecution presented evidence to support a theory that an infant was shaken severely enough to cause death or extreme harm. Twenty-seven of the exoneration cases are no-crime cases, and all 27 include the presentation of false or misleading forensic evidence.

More than half of the exonerees who were wrongfully convicted of a crime where the case involved Shaken Baby Syndrome have been exonerated in the last 10 years. This may reflect a growing understanding of infant injuries and deaths within the forensic and medical communities, and how they can occur (the medical examiners’ group withdrew its paper on the subject in 2006), as well as an acceptance by some courts of this new understanding. It’s now known that this “triad of symptoms” can be present for reasons that have nothing to do with abuse.

WOMEN AND NO-CRIME EXONERATIONS

A disproportionate number of no-crime exoneration cases include female defendants. This is true for both violent and non-violent crimes. Nine percent of all cases, but 16% of no-crime cases, have female exonerees.

Table 5: Women and No-Crime Exonerations

Crime	All cases	No-crime cases
Murder (1,226)	6% female	32% female
Cases with child victims (667)	11% female	19% female
Drug possession (585)	15% female	15% female
All crimes (3,284)	9% female	16% female

For exoneration cases with female defendants, no-crime exoneration cases are the rule. In fact, 73% of the 284 cases with female exonerees are no-crime cases. For men, the figure is 37%. Half of exoneration cases involving child victims are no-crime cases. For female defendants, the figure climbs to 86%. All 37 women wrongfully convicted of child sex abuse were exonerated in no-crime cases.

There is no clear consensus on why women are over-represented in no-crime exoneration cases. Some researchers have suggested that investigations by the police and decisions to prosecute are based on stereotypes of women as mothers and caregivers. They are often the last person to come in contact with a child and as such are believed responsible for a child’s injuries or death.

There could be other factors at play. To be exonerated, one must first be convicted of a crime. It’s possible that the crimes for which women are prosecuted are ones where there is less objective evidence of a crime in the first place. This would include cases based on the testimony of children, inconclusive forensic evidence, or murder cases where there is a claim of self-defense or accident. Quite often, several of these factors converge.

Elgerie Cash and her daughter, Jennifer Weathington, were convicted of murder in 2013 in the shooting death of Weathington's boyfriend. They said the death was accidental. But the state pursued a case based on a false interpretation of the forensic evidence, which required the women—neither of whom were firearms experts—to shoot the man in a peculiar manner. They were exonerated in 2021. The judge who granted them a new trial wrote: “Here, there is no evidence of conduct before, during, or after the shooting that one defendant intentionally aided or abetted the other or intentionally advised, encouraged, hired, counseled, or procured the other to commit murder.”

CONCLUSION

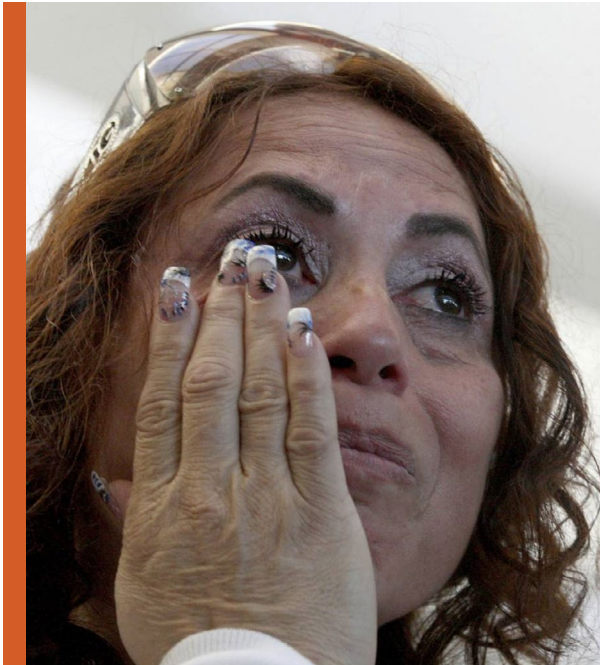
The exonerations in the Registry's main database date back to 1989. Seven of the 23 exonerations that occurred in 1989 were no-crime cases. For the first 10 years of cases, 32% were no-crime cases, with only two no-crime drug exonerations. For the second 10 years, from 1999-2008, 31% of exonerations were no-crime cases, and no-crime drug cases accounted for 27% of those cases. Since then, the percent of no-crime cases has increased sharply, accounting for 940 (46%) of the 2,065 exonerations from 2009-2022. (Of those, 446 are no-crime drug cases.)

It's unclear if that trend will continue. We know that the lion's share of the increase in no-crime exonerations is tied to wrongful convictions for drug possession. The majority of those cases arose from systemic misconduct by corrupt police officers in a handful of communities. We don't know whether this pattern of misconduct will continue to be exposed in future years.

There has been progress within the larger world of no-crime exonerations. The wave of prosecutions for Child Sexual Abuse Hysteria has long disappeared. Investigations into suspicious fires are less likely to rely on discredited theories about burn patterns. Prosecutors in many jurisdictions, not just Harris County, require a confirmatory lab test before accepting a guilty plea for drug possession.

These are all welcome developments. We hope they reduce the number of wrongful convictions for crimes that didn't happen in years to come.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES



ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

MARILYN MULERO

STATE: Illinois
CRIME: Murder
CONVICTED: 1993
EXONERATED: 2022

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS:
False confession, perjury/false accusation, official misconduct, inadequate legal defense

Marilyn Mulero was 21 years old when she and two others were accused of a double murder in Humboldt Park on the west side of Chicago. She falsely confessed after detectives, including Reynaldo Guevara and Ernest Halvorsen, intimidated her. At one point, Halvorsen stood behind her, placed his finger on the back of her head, and made the sound of a gunshot. Mulero was sentenced to death. She was later resentenced to life in prison without parole. In 2022, her conviction was vacated, and the case was dismissed. It joined the dozens of cases dismissed based on evidence of misconduct by Guevara.

JOYCE WATKINS

STATE: Tennessee
CRIME: Murder
CONVICTED: 1988
EXONERATED: 2022

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS:
False/misleading forensic evidence, perjury/false accusation, official misconduct, inadequate legal defense

In 1987, 39-year-old Joyce Watkins and her boyfriend, 43-year-old Charlie Dunn, were charged with the murder of Watkins's four-year-old granddaughter. They were convicted and sentenced to life in prison after a medical examiner concluded that the girl suffered fatal injuries while in their care. In 2022, following a re-investigation by the Tennessee Innocence Project and the Davidson County District Attorney's Conviction Review Unit, their convictions were vacated and the cases were dismissed. The re-investigation revealed that the prosecution had failed to disclose evidence that was favorable to the defense, and new medical evidence showed the original medical conclusions were wrong. The exoneration came too late for Dunn, who had died in 2015, just before he and Watkins were granted parole.



STEPHANIE AMADOR/THE TENNESSEAN

JANE DOROTIK

STATE: California

CRIME: Murder

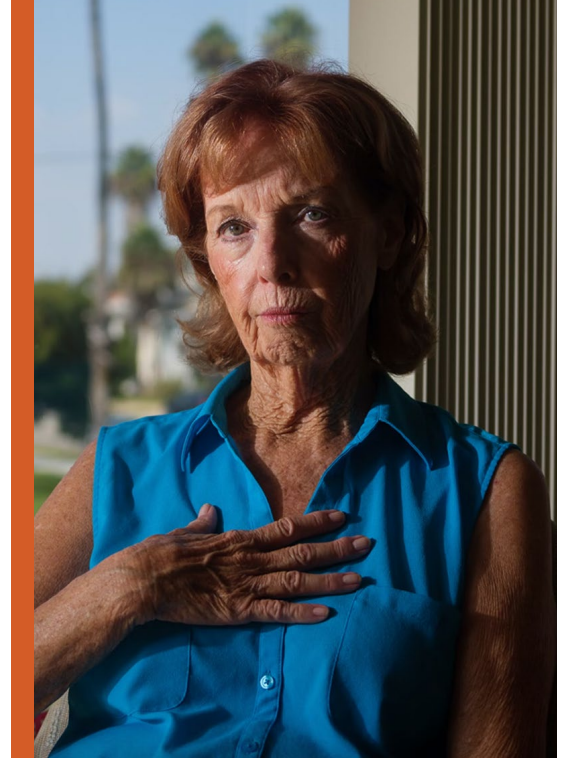
CONVICTED: 2000

EXONERATED: 2022

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS:

False/misleading forensic evidence, perjury/false accusation, official misconduct, inadequate legal defense

In May 2022, the San Diego County District Attorney’s Office dismissed the murder case against 75-year-old Jane Dorotik, who had been convicted of the murder of her husband, Robert. Newly discovered DNA evidence as well as a discrediting of virtually all of the prosecution’s evidence proved what Dorotik had contended “from day one”—that she had nothing to do with the death of her husband, whose body was found bludgeoned to death along a route he routinely took while jogging. The Project for the Innocent at Loyola Law School discovered that the prosecution had failed to disclose exculpatory evidence pointing to another possible suspect. The re-investigation also showed that the prosecution had relied upon false blood spatter evidence to claim Dorotik killed Robert at home and dumped his body at the side of the road.



TAG CHRISTOF/THE INTERCEPT



ERIC SEALS/DETROIT FREE PRESS

GEORGE DEJESUS AND MELVIN DEJESUS

STATE: Michigan

CRIME: Murder

CONVICTED: 1997

EXONERATED: 2022

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS:

False/misleading forensic evidence, perjury/false accusation

George and Melvin DeJesus were convicted in 1997 of the murder of a neighbor in Pontiac, Michigan, based largely on the testimony of a co-defendant, who said that he had raped the victim but that the two brothers had killed her.

They were exonerated with the help of attorneys and investigators with the Western Michigan University-Cooley Law School Innocence Project, the Michigan Innocence Clinic at the University of Michigan Law School, and the Michigan Attorney General’s Conviction Integrity Unit. The investigation found a pattern of sexual assault claims against the co-defendant around the time of the murder, as well as new alibi witnesses for George DeJesus.

When the charges against the DeJesus brothers were dismissed on March 22, 2022, an attorney with the attorney general’s office said: “On behalf of the state of Michigan, I offer you our deepest apologies for all the years that have been taken from you. We’d like to change what happened, but we can’t.”



CBS NEWS

VINCENT SIMMONS

STATE: Louisiana
CRIME: Child sex abuse
CONVICTED: 1977
EXONERATED: 2022

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS:
 Perjury/false accusation,
 official misconduct

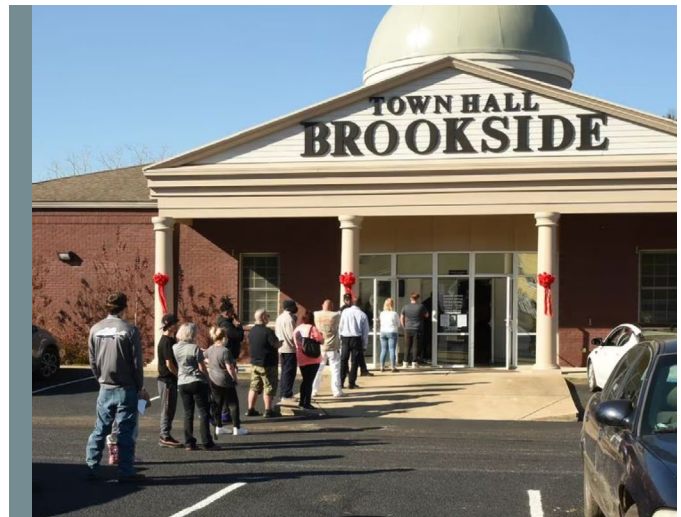
Vincent Simmons, of Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana, was convicted in 1977 on two counts of attempted rape, based largely on the testimony of two 14-year-old girls. He was exonerated in 2022, after a judge ruled that Simmons’s trial attorney had not been given medical records and witness statements that undercut the girls’ stories and other testimony.

Simmons spent 44 years in prison, the most of any exoneree for a crime that didn’t happen.

GROUP EXONERATION JEFFERSON COUNTY

STATE: Alabama
CRIMES: Drug possession, traffic offenses,
 weapons possession, non-violent misdemeanors
NO. OF DEFENDANTS: 22
CONTRIBUTING FACTORS:
 Official misconduct, perjury/false accusation

A circuit-court judge in Jefferson County, Alabama, threw out 110 convictions and then dismissed the charges against 22 defendants based on misconduct committed by officers in the town of Brookside. The misconduct began in 2018, in part as an effort to raise revenue for the Birmingham suburb. While state law prohibited the town’s police from issuing speeding tickets on the interstate, the officers cited motorists for a wide range of non-moving violations. The misconduct was uncovered in part by reporters with the AL.com website. It led to a change in Alabama law that limits the percent of a town’s revenue that can be derived from traffic tickets.



JOE SONGER/AL.COM

EVERY STORY COUNTS.