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exonerationregistry.org

National Registry of Exonerations Created

New Report Reveals Many More Exonerations and False Convictions than Previously Found, but Represents Only “the Tip of the Iceberg”

More than 2,000 people who were falsely convicted of serious crimes have been exonerated in America in the past 23 years.

Nearly 900 of these exonerations are profiled, with searchable data and summaries of the cases on the National Registry of Exonerations, a new joint project of the University of Michigan Law School and the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University. The Registry, available at exonerationregistry.org, will be updated on an ongoing basis. It is by far the largest collection of such cases ever assembled – and the most varied.

More than 1,000 additional cases are “group exonerations” that occurred in response to 13 separate police corruption scandals, most of which involved massive planting of drugs and guns on innocent defendants. The group exonerations are described in a Report from the National Registry, *Exonerations in the United States, 1989 – 2012*, but are not included in the Registry itself.

As the Report documents in detail, there are many more false convictions and exonerations that have not been found.

“The National Registry of Exonerations gives an unprecedented view of the scope of the problem of wrongful convictions in the United States,” said Rob Warden, Executive Director of the Center on Wrongful Convictions. “It’s a widespread problem.”

“It used to be that almost all the exonerations we knew about were murder and rape cases. We’re finally beginning to see beyond that,” said Michigan Law professor Samuel Gross, editor of the Registry and an author of the Report. “This is a sea change.”

The Report includes the following cases, most of which do not appear in any previous compilation:

- 58 exonerations for drug, tax, white collar and other non-violent crimes.
- 39 exonerations in Federal cases.
- 102 exonerations for child sex abuse convictions.
- 129 exonerations of defendants who were convicted of crimes that never happened.
- 135 exonerations of defendants who confessed to crimes they didn’t commit.
- 71 exonerations of innocent defendants who pled guilty.

Plus more than 1,000 group exoneration cases – including over 200 drivers who were framed for drunk driving by police officers, who usually stole money from their wallets in the process.

According to Gross, the cases in the Registry show that false convictions are not one type of problem but several that required different types of solutions.

- For **murder**, the biggest problem is perjury, usually by a witness who claims to have witnessed the crime or participated in it. Murder exoneration also include many false confessions.
- In **rape** cases, false convictions are almost always based on eyewitness mistakes – more often than not, mistakes by white victims who misidentify black defendants.
- False convictions for **robbery** are also almost always caused by eyewitness misidentifications, but there are few exonerations because DNA evidence is hardly ever useful in robbery cases.
- **Child sex abuse** exonerations are almost all about fabricated crimes that never occurred. (See Table 13.)

The ten states with the most exonerations are Illinois, New York, Texas, California, Michigan, Louisiana, Florida, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania (not counting the 39 exonerations in Federal cases). The states with most exonerations are not necessarily those where most false convictions have occurred. (See Table 7.)

“It’s clear that the exonerations we found are the tip of an iceberg,” said Gross. “Most people who are falsely convicted are not exonerated; they serve their time or die in prison. And when they are exonerated, a lot of times it happens quietly, out of public view.”

For example, most people in the United States live in counties in which there have been no exonerations – including counties like San Bernardino in California and Bexar in Texas that have populations in the millions. “Obviously there are false convictions in those counties – and no doubt exonerations in some cases,” said Gross, “we just don’t know about them.”

According to Warden, “this is a good start – a milestone – but there’s a long way to go before we have a complete picture of wrongful convictions in the United States.”

“We’ve begun to find exonerations that don’t fit the mold we’re used to – some that were initiated by prosecutors or police, and some that were deliberately concealed – but we know there are many more that we haven’t found, at least not so far,” said Gross.

“If you’ve been exonerated and aren’t in this Registry, or if you know someone who has been exonerated and isn’t included, we want to know about it,” said Gross.

“The more we learn about false convictions, the better we’ll be at preventing them – or if that fails, at finding and correcting them as best we can after the fact,” said Gross.

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