

INNOCENCE PROJECT

Fact Sheet

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Facts on Post-Conviction DNA Exonerations

There have been 292 post-conviction DNA exonerations in the United States.

- The first DNA exoneration took place in 1989. Exonerations have been won in 36 states; since 2000, there have been 225 exonerations.
- 17 of the 292 people exonerated through DNA served time on death row. Another 15 were charged with capital crimes but not sentenced to death.
- The average length of time served by exonerees is 13 years. The total number of years served is approximately 3,839.
- The average age of exonerees at the time of their wrongful convictions was 27.

Races of the 292 exonerees:

181 African Americans
 85 Caucasians
 21 Latinos
 2 Asian American
 4 whose race is unknown

- The true suspects and/or perpetrators have been identified in 142 of the DNA exoneration cases.
- Since 1989, there have been tens of thousands of cases where prime suspects were identified and pursued—until DNA testing (prior to conviction) proved that they were wrongly accused.
- In more than 25 percent of cases in a National Institute of Justice study, suspects were excluded once DNA testing was conducted during the criminal investigation (the study, conducted in 1995, included 10,060 cases where testing was performed by FBI labs).
- 60 percent of the people exonerated through DNA testing have been financially compensated. 27 states, the federal government, and the District of Columbia have passed laws to compensate people who were wrongfully incarcerated. Awards under these statutes vary from state to state.
- An Innocence Project review of our closed cases from 2004 - 2010 revealed that 22 percent of cases were closed because of lost or destroyed evidence.

Leading Causes of Wrongful Convictions

These DNA exoneration cases have provided irrefutable proof that wrongful convictions are not isolated or rare events, but arise from systemic defects that can be precisely identified and addressed. For more than 15 years, the Innocence Project has worked to pinpoint these trends.

Eyewitness Misidentification Testimony was a factor in 72 percent percent of post-conviction DNA exoneration cases in the U.S., making it the leading cause of these wrongful convictions. At least 40 percent of these eyewitness identifications involved a cross racial identification (race data is currently only available on the victim, not for non-victim eyewitnesses). Studies have shown that people are less able to recognize faces of a different race than their own. These suggested reforms are embraced by leading criminal justice organizations and have been adopted in the states of New Jersey and North Carolina, large cities like Minneapolis and Seattle, and many smaller jurisdictions. [Read more.](#)

Unvalidated or Improper Forensic Science played a role in approximately 50 percent of wrongful

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convictions later overturned by DNA testing. While DNA testing was developed through extensive scientific research at top academic centers, many other forensic techniques – such as hair microscopy, bite mark comparisons, firearm tool mark analysis and shoe print comparisons – have never been subjected to rigorous scientific evaluation. Meanwhile, forensics techniques that have been properly validated – such as serology, commonly known as blood typing – are sometimes improperly conducted or inaccurately conveyed in trial testimony. In other wrongful conviction cases, forensic scientists have engaged in misconduct. [Read more.](#)

False confessions and incriminating statements lead to wrongful convictions in approximately 27 percent of cases. 28 of the DNA exonerees [pled guilty](#) to crimes they did not commit. The Innocence Project encourages police departments to electronically record all custodial interrogations in their entirety in order to prevent coercion and to provide an accurate record of the proceedings.

Informants contributed to wrongful convictions in 18 percent of cases. Whenever informant testimony is used, the Innocence Project recommends that the judge instruct the jury that most informant testimony is unreliable as it may be offered in return for deals, special treatment, or the dropping of charges. Prosecutors should also reveal any incentive the informant might receive, and all communication between prosecutors and informants should be recorded. [Read more.](#)

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