

The National Registry of **EXONERATIONS**

EXONERATIONS IN 2014 **The National Registry of Exonerations** **January 27, 2015**

2014 was a record breaking year for exonerations in the United States, by a large margin.

The National Registry of Exonerations has recorded [125 exonerations in 2014](#). The previous highest total was [91](#) in 2012 and [again](#) in 2013, followed by [87](#) in 2001.¹ All told, the Registry now lists [1,535](#) exonerations in the United States, from 1989 through January 20, 2015.

The magnitude of the difference between 2014 and prior years – a 37% increase over 2012 and 2013 – is largely driven by a concentration of 33 exonerations in drug cases in Harris County (Houston) Texas, 30 more than there were in that county in 2013. But 2014 was a record year even without Harris County; there were 91 non-Harris County exonerations in 2014, compared to 88 in 2012 and 87 in 2013.

A major reason for the record number of exonerations is the impact of prosecutorial Conviction Integrity Units (CIUs). The number of CIUs and the number of exonerations they generated increased dramatically in 2014. There were 49 CIU exonerations in 2014, including 10 murder exonerations in Brooklyn, and 29 of the 33 Harris County drug-crime exonerations we already mentioned.

Part I of this report describes **basic patterns** across the 125 known exonerations in 2014.

Part II focuses on **Conviction Integrity Units (CIUs)**.

I. Basic Patterns

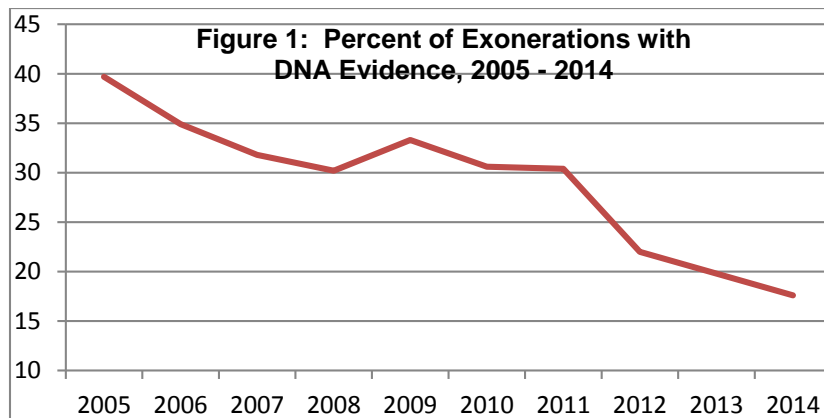
- **Exonerations by Jurisdiction.** There were exonerations in 27 states in 2014, plus [federal cases](#) in the District of Columbia and elsewhere. The states with the most exonerations are, in order: [Texas](#), [New York](#), [Illinois](#), [Michigan](#), [Ohio](#), [North Carolina](#), [Louisiana](#), [Maryland](#), [Oregon](#), [Pennsylvania](#), and [Tennessee](#). See Table 1 for a complete list.

¹ Last year we also reported a record, 87 known exonerations in 2013, at that time the highest number in a year. See: https://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Documents/Exonerations_in_2013_Report.pdf. A year later, 2012 and 2013 are tied. We learned of 4 additional exonerations in 2013, bringing the total to 91. But we also learned of *18 additional exonerations* in 2012, which, together with the 83 we knew about a year ago, also totals 91. These results suggest that we have become more successful at identifying current exonerations near the time they occur.

Table 1: Exonerations in 2014 by Jurisdiction

Texas – 39	Louisiana – 3	Dist. Of Columbia – 2	Arizona – 1	Virginia – 1
New York – 17	Maryland – 3	Florida – 2	Colorado – 1	Washington – 1
Illinois – 7	Oregon – 3	Hawaii – 2	Iowa – 1	West Virginia – 1
Michigan – 7	Pennsylvania – 3	New Jersey – 2	Kentucky – 1	
Ohio – 6	Tennessee – 3	Oklahoma – 2	Missouri – 1	Federal – 8
North Carolina – 4	California – 2	Alabama – 1	South Carolina – 1	

- **Death sentences.** [Six](#) defendants who had been sentenced to death were exonerated in 2014, the most since 2009: [three](#) in Ohio, [two](#) in North Carolina and [one](#) in Louisiana. Each had been imprisoned for 30 years or more, and two – [Ricky Jackson](#) and [Wiley Bridgeman](#) in Ohio – spent more than 39 years in prison, the longest terms of incarceration for any known exonerees in the United States. The number of new death sentences in the United States has plummeted in recent years, and the number of executions is at a 20-year low,² but it appears that among the thousands of death sentenced defendants who remain in prison, there are many who were convicted in error.³
- **DNA.** The number of DNA exonerations increased slightly, from [18](#) in 2013 to [22](#) in 2014, but remains at about the average for the past 10 years.
 - At the same time, the number of non-DNA exonerations rose to an all-time high of [103](#), more than *all exonerations*, DNA and non-DNA combined, in any single previous year.
 - The net result is that DNA exonerations, which have always been a minority of known exonerations in the United States, were down to 18% of all exonerations in 2014. See Figure 1.



² See: <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/>.

³ See: <http://www.pnas.org/content/111/20/7230.full.pdf+html?with-ds=yes>.

- **The crimes for which the defendants were convicted.** Almost three-quarters of the exonerations we know of since 1989 (1124/1535) are for *homicides* or *sex crimes* (including child sex abuse). But the proportion of exonerations that do *not* involve killings or sex crimes cases has been growing steadily, from 25% of all cases from 1989 through the end of 1993 (the earliest 5-year period covered by the Registry) to 34% for 2010 through 2014 (the most recent 5-year period).

In 2013 the proportion of non-homicide non-sex crime exonerations was 33% (30/91); in 2014 it jumped to 48% (60/125), largely because of the bulge in drug-crime exonerations. See Table 2.

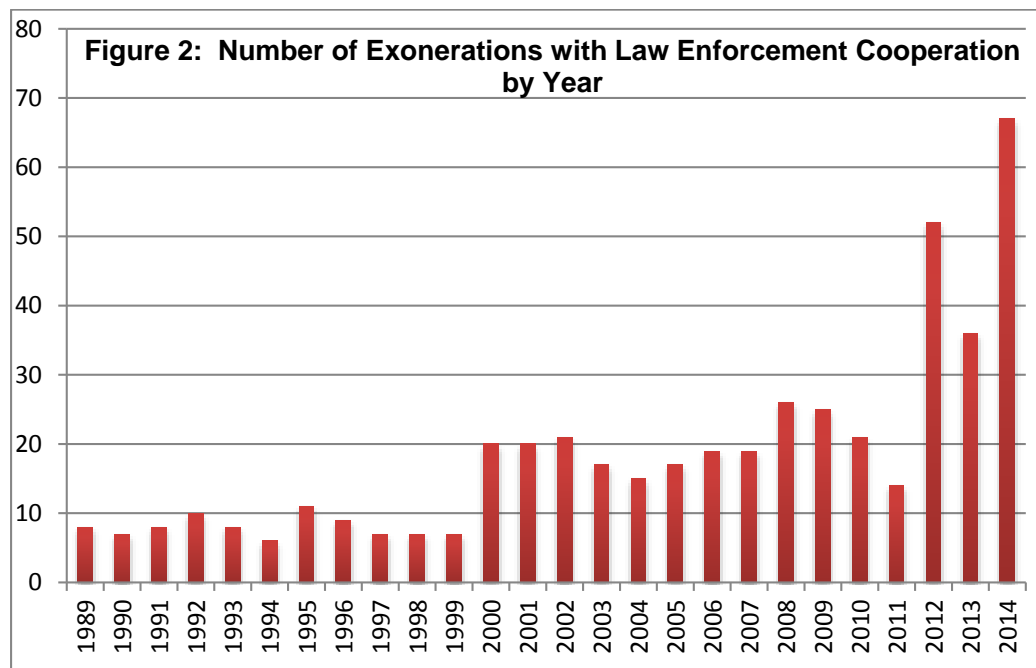
Table 2: Exonerations by Crime, 2013 and 2014

	2013	2014
Homicide	46% (42)	38% (48)
Sexual Assault	14% (13)	10% (12)
Child Sex Abuse	7% (6)	4% (5)
<i>All Homicides & Sex Crimes</i>	67% (61)	52% (65)
Drug Crimes	12% (11)	31% (39)
All other crimes	21% (19)	17% (21)
<i>All Non-Homicide Non-Sex Crimes</i>	33% (30)	48% (60)
Total	100% (91)	100% (125)

Nearly 85% of the drug-case exonerations in 2014 were in Harris County (33/39), and almost all of those were CIU cases that we discuss in Part II. Because this may be a short term trend, we present some patterns separately, with and without drug-crime exonerations.

- **No-crime cases.** In [58](#) of the 125 known exonerations in 2014 – 46% – no crime in fact occurred. This is a record number that is likely to grow as we learn about more 2014 exonerations.
 - Over 90% of the [drug-crime exonerations](#) in 2014 were [no-crime cases](#) (36/39), including all 33 drug-crime exonerations in Harris County.
 - No-crime cases were much less common among exonerations for non-drug crimes, 26% in 2014 (22/86). This is a slight increase from the average of 23% no-crime cases among exonerations that did not involve drug crimes from 1989 through 2013 (310/1337).
- **Guilty pleas.** [Forty-seven](#) of the 125 defendants who were exonerated in 2014 – 38% – were cleared of criminal convictions to which they had pled guilty, also a record number and a continuation of a trend we reported last year:

- [Almost all](#) drug-crime exonerations in 2014 were for convictions based on guilty pleas (36/39).
- There are far fewer convictions based on guilty pleas among 2014 exonerations for non-drug crimes, 13% (11/86), and fewer yet in previous years: only 9% guilty pleas among all non-drug exonerations from 1989 through 2013 (121/1337).
- **Law enforcement cooperation.** A total of 67 known exonerations in 2014 – 54% of the total – were obtained at the initiative or with the cooperation of law enforcement. This is the highest annual total of exonerations with law enforcement cooperation, followed by 52 such cases in 2012, and 36 in 2013. See Figure 2.



More than 70% of the 2014 exonerations with law enforcement cooperation were the work of Conviction Integrity Units (49/67). (We discuss this issue in more detail in the next section.)

Judging from known exonerations in 2014, the legal system is increasingly willing to act on innocence claims that have often been ignored: those without biological evidence or with no perpetrator who can be identified because in fact no crime was committed; cases with comparatively light sentences; and judgments based on guilty pleas by defendants who accepted plea bargains to avoid pre-trial detention and the risk of harsher punishment after trial.

II. Conviction Integrity Units

There's a long history of prosecutors reinvestigating convictions and obtaining exonerations. In 1956 Roy Eaton was exonerated in Illinois, 16 years after he was convicted of armed robbery, as a result of a four-year investigation by the prosecutor who had successfully opposed his petition for release.⁴ Twenty-five years later, in 1981, when Aaron Owen was exonerated in California after 9 years in prison for a murder he did not commit, he said, "The same man who prosecuted me was the only one who would listen to me."⁵

These examples are not unique. And, as we see in Figure 2, law enforcement personnel took initiative or cooperated in a substantial proportion of all exonerations, 31% since 1989 and a majority of exonerations in 2014. Nearly all of those exonerations included initiative or cooperation by prosecutors (462/480).

Conviction integrity units build on this tradition, and extend and change it in fundamental ways. They reflect a recognition that erroneous convictions are an important problem, and that prosecutors – the central and most powerful actors in the criminal justice system – should address this problem systematically. They embody a commitment of institutional resources and prestige to identifying and remedying false convictions that have already occurred, and to preventing them in the future.

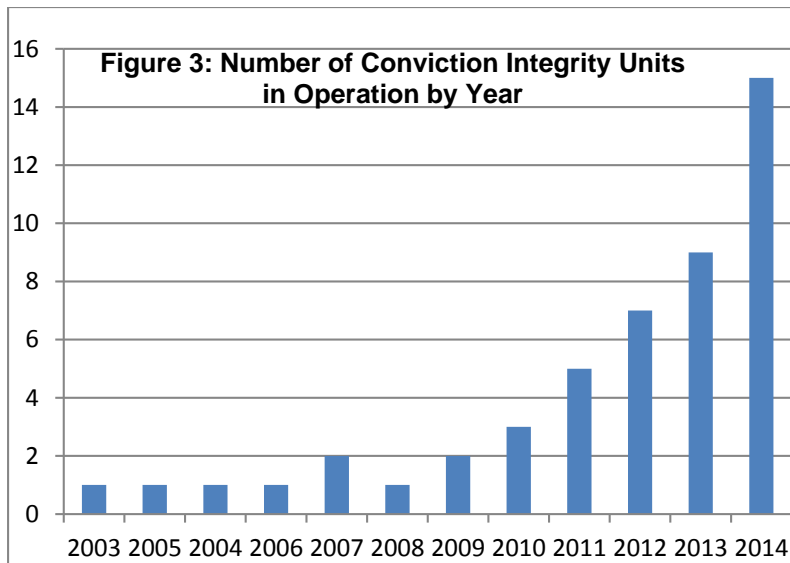
The first Conviction Integrity Unit got relatively little attention. It was founded in Santa Clara, California, by District Attorney George Kennedy in 2002. The Santa Clara CIU was responsible for a [murder exoneration in 2003](#) and a [robbery exoneration in 2007](#) – the same year the unit was abolished by Kennedy's successor, Dolores Carr, because of a budget cut. (The unit was also responsible for a rape exoneration in 2009 that it set in motion in 2007.) In 2010 Jeff Rosen defeated Ms. Carr and was elected District Attorney after a campaign in which he promised to re-establish the unit – which he did in January 2011.

The longest standing Conviction Integrity Unit in the country is the Dallas County CIU, which was founded by District Attorney Craig Watkins after he took office in January 2007. It has generated 25 exonerations to date and attracted a great deal of national attention. The Dallas County CIU is often cited as the model for other CIUs that were established in the years that followed. In November 2014 Mr. Watkins was defeated in his bid to be re-elected to a third term. His successor, Susan Hawk, has said that she intends to maintain and possibly expand the unit.

Starting at 1 in 2008, the number of CIUs across the country grew steadily for a few years – from 2 in 2009 to 9 in 2013 – and then jumped to 15 in 2014. See Figure 3.

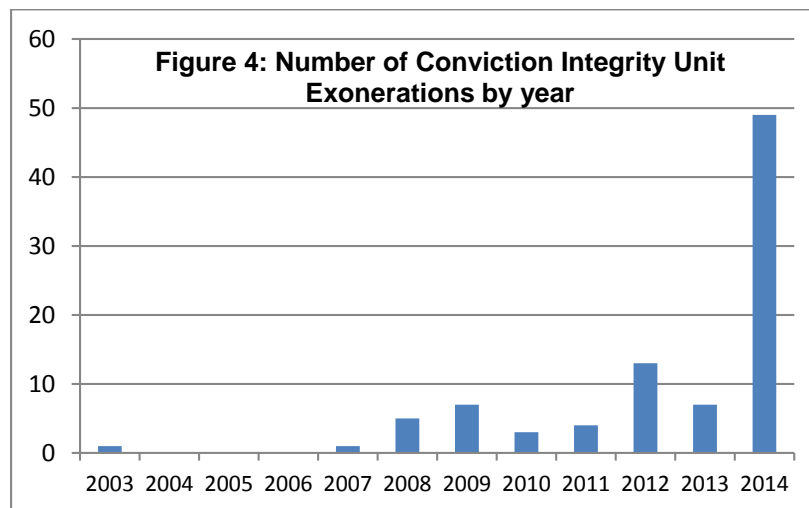
⁴ Edward D. Radin, *The Innocents* (Morrow; 1964) pp. 125-29, 249.

⁵ Jack Viets, "The Wrong Man Spent Nine Years in Prison," San Francisco Chronicle, March 5, 1981.



The Conviction Integrity Units we count are long-term operations that work to prevent, to identify and to remedy false convictions. We do not include one-shot projects that review particular sets of cases for possible errors.⁶ These units all operate under the authority of local prosecutors with primary responsibility for prosecuting crimes in a county or district. Most but not all are called “Conviction Integrity Unit,” the term we use as a general reference. For a list of CIUs, including the names of defendants and years of all CIU exonerations, see Appendix 1.

All told, these units worked on [90 exonerations from 2003 through 2014 \(and three more so far in 2015\)](#). [More than half](#) of all CIU exonerations occurred in 2014 (49/93). See Figure 4:



⁶ We know of four such projects: a review of cases with potentially flawed forensic evidence in Wayne County, Michigan, see Doug Guthrie, “Legal unit to monitor Detroit gun cases,” Detroit News, December 13, 2008; a review of homicide cases by the Milwaukee County District Attorney’s office because of concerns about DNA collection procedures, <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/look-conviction-review-initiatives-nationwide>; a state-wide effort to identify old cases for DNA testing in Connecticut, <http://www.ct.gov/csao/cwp/view.asp?a=1801&q=545362>, and one in Colorado, see <http://grants.ojp.usdoj.gov:85/selector/title?solicitationTitle=NIJ%20FY%2009%20Postconviction%20DNA%20Testing%20Assistance%20Program&po=NIJ>.

We contacted each CIU we know about to determine if it was responsible for any exonerations. The ones we count in this report are exonerations that meet our criteria and are listed on our web site, and that the CIUs themselves identified as cases they had worked on. There are a few cases that some offices consider to be exonerations but that don't meet our criteria, typically because the defendant pled guilty to or was convicted of a lesser included offense.⁷ The fact that a CIU obtained an exoneration does not necessarily mean that the office in question concluded that the defendant in the case is factually innocent. The CIU cases we list can be identified and sorted on the Registry web site.⁸ To date, 7 CIUs have produced exonerations, and 8 – those founded since the beginning of 2013 – have not.

Three-quarters of the CIU exonerations through 2014 (68/90) were obtained by three offices: in Dallas County, Texas; in Kings County (Brooklyn), New York; and in Harris County (Houston), Texas. We will discuss each briefly.

(1) Dallas County has a high number of DNA exonerations (25), second only to Cook County, Illinois (39). A major reason is the local crime lab, the Southwestern Institute of Forensic Science (SWIFS). Most American crime labs either return the biological samples they test to the police departments that sent them in, or destroy the samples. SWIFS has a long standing policy of retaining the biological samples that it tests, which makes it comparatively easy to find and test samples for convictions in which DNA may prove innocence.

As a result, when the **Dallas County District Attorney's Conviction Integrity Unit** was created by District Attorney Craig Watkins in 2007 it inherited a backlog of innocence claims in cases where DNA testing was possible. Not surprisingly, all five exonerations obtained by the Dallas CIU through 2008, its second year in operation, were based on DNA.

The unit soon branched out. From 2009 through 2014, more than half of its cases did not include DNA (11/20), and the Dallas DA's Office prosecuted five defendants it identified as the actual criminals in rape and murder cases for which other men were falsely convicted. The Dallas CIU has also worked with the Dallas Police Department to improve investigative procedures for interrogation and eyewitness identification in order to reduce the risk of future false convictions.⁹

⁷ For example, the Santa Clara CIU describes the case of Mashelle Bullington as an exoneration, but it does not meet our criteria, because even after she was cleared of a felony gun use charge, she remains convicted of a lesser related crime. See: <http://law.scu.edu/ncip/exonerees/>.

⁸ To do so, go to the "Detail View" of our data and select "CIU" under the header "Tags" on the banner directly above the listed cases.

⁹ See Isaac Wolf, Scripps News, "Dallas leads the way in addressing wrongful convictions," abc2news at: <http://www.abc2news.com/news/world/dallas-leads-the-way-in-addressing-wrongful-convictions>.

In 2014 the Dallas CIU exonerated [Michael Phillips](#), who had been falsely convicted of rape in 1990, after DNA tests excluded Phillips as the rapist and identified the real criminal. Mr. Phillips' exoneration was the first in the nation that was the result of a systematic search of old convictions for possible errors that could be resolved by DNA testing even though the defendant was not seeking exoneration.¹⁰

(2) When the **Brooklyn District Attorney's Conviction Review Unit** was established in 2011, District Attorney Charles Hynes invited local defense attorneys to tell the unit about cases in which they believed innocent defendants had been convicted. One such case was that of [David Ranta](#), who was convicted of murder in 1991; in 2013 he became the second person exonerated by the Conviction Review Unit. The reinvestigation of David Ranta's case exposed a pattern of extraordinary misconduct by Detective Louis Scarcella, who investigated the murder for which Mr. Ranta was convicted. In the aftermath of Ranta's exoneration the Unit was presented with dozens of murder cases from the 1980s and '90s in which the defendants claimed that they were falsely convicted by evidence manufactured by Detective Scarcella.

In November of 2013 District Attorney Hynes stood for re-election after 24 years in office. His opponent, former federal prosecutor Ken Thompson, argued in his campaign that under Hynes the Conviction Review Unit was not doing a thorough job of investigating the Scarcella cases, and that Hynes could not be trusted to reinvestigate convictions obtained under his own leadership. Thompson beat Hynes by a large margin, and took office on January 1, 2014.

As District Attorney, Thompson greatly expanded the Conviction Review Unit. It now has 10 attorneys, three investigators and a yearly budget of \$1.1 million. (By comparison, the Dallas County CIU has two attorneys and one investigator.) They are investigating over 100 cases, most but not all involving Detective Scarcella.

In 2014 the Brooklyn Conviction Review Unit exonerated ten defendants, all in murder cases. Four had been investigated by Louis Scarcella (three additional murder exonerations from other years also involved Scarcella). Four of the ten exonerations included DNA testing, although in the cases of two co-defendants the DNA evidence was not dispositive on its own. On January 9, 2015, the Unit produced its eleventh exoneration under Thompson's leadership, that of [Derrick Hamilton](#). Like several others, Hamilton was convicted of murder in the early 1990s on the basis of false evidence obtained by Detective Scarcella.

(3) The **Harris County District Attorney's Post Conviction Review Section** was established by District Attorney Pat Lykos in 2009. It was responsible for two rape

¹⁰ Samuel Gross, the Editor of the National Registry of Exonerations, proposed this systematic DNA testing program to the Dallas County CIU in 2007, and worked on the search that led to Mr. Phillips' exoneration several years later.

exonerations in 2010, [Michael Anthony Green's](#), by DNA, and [Allen Wayne Porter's](#), without DNA.

Starting in 2005, there were occasional Harris County cases in which defendants pled guilty to possession of illegal drugs, and then were exonerated when tests by the Houston Police Department Crime Lab revealed that the alleged drugs that were seized from them in fact contained no controlled substances. In most of these cases, the seized materials tested positive for illegal drugs during field tests by the arresting officers. There was one such case in 2005, another in 2006, two in 2009 and one more in 2010. The rate picked up after 2011 when the crime lab started working to clear a huge backlog in drug testing cases, leading to 3 similar exonerations in 2012 and again in 2013. In some cases the testing that led to exoneration occurred within [two months](#) of the guilty plea; in others it took longer than [4 years](#) or as long as [6 years](#). The Conviction Review Section did not work on any of these cases.

In early 2014 this situation came to the attention of Assistant District Attorney Inger Chandler, the newly assigned head of the Conviction Review Section. She identified two problems. The crime lab was assigning a low priority to drug tests in cases of defendants who had pled guilty; as a result some tests were done months or even years after the guilty pleas. And when exculpatory test results were sent to the DA's office, they were divvied up among the deputies who happened to be assigned to the courts in which the convictions took place. As a result, these cases were handled inconsistently and many simply fell through the cracks and were lost.

Starting in mid-2014, the Post Conviction Review Section embarked on a program to address these problems. The handling of all cases of defendants who were cleared by drug tests after pleading guilty was centralized in that section. The section hired a former assistant district attorney to spend several months organizing and clearing the backlog of such cases. And the Houston Forensic Science Center (which took over from the Houston Police Department Crime Lab in 2014) was asked to test all drug samples in the order received, rather than put the guilty-plea cases at the back of the queue.

The upshot was 29 drug crime exonerations by the Post Conviction Review Section in 2014 – and two more so far in 2015 – plus 40 additional drug convictions that were dismissed in 2014, in cases that do not meet Registry criteria for exoneration.¹¹ For some of these exonerations, the time from conviction to exoneration was over [4 years](#), or even more than [6 years](#). Other defendants were exonerated far faster than before – some within [2 months](#) of conviction, one within [3 days](#) of conviction.

¹¹ In those 40 cases the crime lab reported that the seized substance included a lesser quantity of the drug than required for the specific crime the defendants pled to, or a different controlled substance than the one specified in the plea. Such cases do not count as exonerations by our criteria because they include unexplained physical evidence of guilt of crimes closely related to those the defendants were convicted of.

The **Dallas County Conviction Integrity Unit** dominated the field for several years. It was the only CIU for nearly two years, and accounted for more than two-thirds of all CIU exonerations through 2012. It got off to a quick start with DNA cases thanks in part to the policies of the Southwestern Institute for Forensic Science. It has investigated non-DNA cases as well, and deals with issues that are common to most large metropolitan jurisdictions across the country. It deserves credit for leading and inspiring other counties to follow.

The **Brooklyn Conviction Review Unit** began as one of several large city CIUs that were created within several years of the Dallas CIU – and then, in 2013, it ran into a hornets’ nest of bad murder convictions that were 20 to nearly 30 years old. District Attorney Thompson has devoted unprecedented resources to reinvestigating those cases. The result is an unprecedented number of CIU exonerations – 10 in 2014, one so far in 2015, mostly the result of difficult investigations that could not be resolved by DNA or other forensic evidence – and more to come.

This is an impressive accomplishment, but there is no reason to believe that the problem it addresses is restricted to Brooklyn. The concentration of false murder convictions in Brooklyn in the 1980s and ’90s is often explained by a crisis in law enforcement: a murder rate about 5 times what it is now, and limited resources to investigate and prosecute those murders. The same crisis conditions, however, existed in other boroughs in New York City, and in other urban counties across the country. If the same resources were devoted to similar cases from other cities, many additional false murder convictions would no doubt be found.

The **Harris County Conviction Review Section** ran into a different sort of aggregation of false convictions: cases in which defendants pled guilty to possession of illegal drugs when in fact they had no such drugs. Why would defendants plead guilty to drug crimes when they knew that lab tests would show that they were carrying no drugs? Inger Chandler, head of the Conviction Review Section, offers two explanations: some probably *thought* the pills or powders they were carrying contained illegal drugs when in fact they didn’t; others – especially defendants with criminal records, who generally cannot post the comparatively high bails that are set for them and who risk substantial terms in prison if convicted – agreed to attractive plea bargains at their initial court appearances, despite their innocence, rather than remain in pretrial custody and risk years in prison. There is some evidence that pretrial detention and the fear of long terms of imprisonment did influence these false guilty pleas. Nine of the 11 Harris County drug exonerees who pled guilty to significant terms of imprisonment (3 months to 2 years) had felony records that we know about, while 8 of the 11 who had no known criminal records got deals that allowed them to go free immediately.

In general, exonerations are excursions into the past. Excluding drug cases, most of those exonerated in 2014 were convicted 10 to 39 years before. We can’t tell from those cases whether we’re getting better or worse at avoiding wrongful convictions in the first place. The drug exonerations in Harris County are different. The reforms instigated by the Conviction Review

Section – faster testing, simpler lines of communication – mean that some errors are now detected in weeks if not days. And since these are errors that can be detected by inexpensive testing, false guilty pleas to possession of illegal drugs that don't exist could be erased entirely in short order, in Harris County.

In many jurisdictions, forensic drug testing is rarely done, if ever, once a defendant has pled guilty. And if it is done and no illegal drugs are found, the results may well be lost or ignored, as many were in Harris County until last year. Those practices have been changed in Harris County, and could be changed in drug prosecutions elsewhere. But there's a larger problem that's much less tractable: What about innocent defendants in non-drug cases who plead guilty to misdemeanors and comparatively light felonies – assault, shop lifting, breaking and entering – in order to avoid pretrial detention and the risk of long terms of imprisonment after trial? Or innocent drug defendants who plead guilty to possession of actual illegal drugs that belonged to someone else? There is no cheap, reliable test for guilt or innocence in those cases. Very few such convictions ever result in exoneration, but the number of false convictions involved could dwarf the total for serious violent felonies.

* * *

Conviction Integrity Units are not for everybody. They are not feasible in small prosecutorial offices, staffed by a dozen attorneys or fewer. And, as we have noted, they are not the only setting in which prosecutors and police officers work to exonerate innocent defendants. Far from it.¹²

Conviction Integrity Units have their critics. Some question the objectivity, commitment and openness of prosecutors whose task is to reconsider convictions obtained by their own colleagues and predecessors. Particular units have been criticized as mere window dressing, or public relations ploys.¹³ The Dallas County District Attorney's Office addressed these concerns by hiring two prominent criminal defense attorneys in succession to head its Conviction Integrity Unit, and by working in cooperation with the local public defender and other defense lawyers. Other conviction integrity units have recruited outside advisors, usually including criminal defense lawyers. We're in no position to judge the effectiveness of these efforts to bring outside voices to bear on the work of CIUs – or for that matter to evaluate the effectiveness of most CIUs in any respect. Nearly half have been in operation for less than a year, and new ones are sure to be started in the years to come.

We can say two things: *First*, several Conviction Integrity Units have accomplished a great deal in a short period of time. They may have initiated a fundamental change in the way false convictions are addressed in the United States, but that remains to be seen.

¹² The case of [Jonathan Moore](#) in Aurora, Illinois is a good example: his exoneration was entirely the product of a detailed investigation by the Aurora Police Department and the Kane County, Illinois, State's Attorney's Office.

¹³ See Elizabeth Barber, "Dallas targets wrongful convictions, and revolution starts to spread," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 25, 2014, at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Justice/2014/0525/Dallas-targets-wrongful-convictions-and-revolution-starts-to-spread>; Hella Winston, "Wrongful Convictions: Can Prosecutors Reform Themselves?" *The Crime Report*, March 27, 2014, at: <http://www.thecrimereport.org/news/inside-criminal-justice/2014-03-wrongful-convictions-can-prosecutors-reform-themselv>.

Second, prosecutors – through Conviction Integrity Units or by other means – can do more to prevent and correct wrongful convictions than anybody else. Prosecutors are the central actors in the American system of criminal justice. They have the unique unreviewable power to charge defendants with crimes and obtain convictions, or to dismiss charges or never file them at all. They are as well positioned as anybody to identify innocent defendants and to exonerate them – if they set their minds to it – and only they can prosecute the real criminals who escaped justice when others were convicted for their crimes. And, most important, prosecutors have the authority and influence to undertake and encourage reforms that will reduce the number of false convictions that occur in the future.

The [National Registry of Exonerations](#), a project of the University of Michigan Law School, provides detailed information about every known exoneration in the United States since 1989—cases in which a person was wrongly convicted of a crime and later cleared of all the charges based on new evidence of innocence.

The National Registry
of
EXONERATIONS

Appendix: Conviction Integrity Unit (CIU) Exonerations, by Office and Year

1. Offices that have had CIU exonerations, by year of founding

Santa Clara County Office of the District Attorney Conviction Integrity Unit *(San Jose, California), founded in 2002, 4 exonerations*

2003	Walker, Quedillis Ricardo	Murder
2007	Foley, Kenneth Wayne	Robbery
2009	Shull, George Edward	Sexual Assault
2012	Diaz, Luis	Sexual Assault

Dallas County District Attorney's Office Conviction Integrity Unit *(Dallas, Texas), founded in 2007, 25 exonerations*

2008	Chatman, Charles	Sexual Assault
	McGowan, Thomas	Sexual Assault
	Phillips, Steven	Sexual Assault
	Waller, Patrick	Kidnapping
	Woodard, James Lee	Murder
2009	Blackshire, James	Child Sex Abuse
	Evans, Jerry Lee	Sexual Assault
	Johnson, Antrone	Child Sex Abuse
	Lindsey, Johnnie	Sexual Assault
	Scott, Christopher Shun	Murder
	Simmons, Jr., Claude	Murder
2010	Brodie, Stephen	Child Sex Abuse
2011	Duke, Dale	Child Sex Abuse
	Dupree, Jr., Cornelius	Robbery
	Fields, Hilliard	Child Sex Abuse
	Pinchback, Johnny	Child Sex Abuse
2012	Jackson, Raymond	Sexual Assault
	Miles, Richard	Murder
	Robertson, Shakara	Robbery
	Smith, Marcus Lashun	Robbery
	Washington, Darryl	Robbery
	Williams, James Curtis	Sexual Assault
	Wyatt, Rickey Dale	Sexual Assault
2014	Massingill, Anthony	Robbery
	Phillips, Michael	Sexual Assault

Harris County District Attorney's Post Conviction Review Section

(Houston, Texas), founded in 2009, 33 exonerations

2010	Green, Michael Anthony	Sexual Assault
	Porter, Allen Wayne	Sexual Assault
2014	Baker, Terry	Drug Possession or Sale
	Baltierrez, Jose	Drug Possession or Sale
	Berghoff, Stacy	Drug Possession or Sale
	Brooks, Gwendolyn	Drug Possession or Sale
	Castor, Gregory	Drug Possession or Sale
	Chavez, China	Drug Possession or Sale
	Chavez, Moses	Drug Possession or Sale
	Curtis, Exzavian	Drug Possession or Sale
	Diaz, Victor	Drug Possession or Sale
	Earnest, Michael	Drug Possession or Sale
	Garza, Michael	Drug Possession or Sale
	Leblanc, David	Drug Possession or Sale
	Lunsford, Kacie	Drug Possession or Sale
	Mable, Kendrick	Drug Possession or Sale
	Mendez, Alexandra	Drug Possession or Sale
	Nguyen, Anthony	Drug Possession or Sale
	Noel, Michael	Drug Possession or Sale
	Nowak, Kevin	Drug Possession or Sale
	Peters, Harold	Drug Possession or Sale
	Pitre, Derick	Drug Possession or Sale
	Rainbolt, Thomas	Drug Possession or Sale
	Recendez-Lopez, Edgar	Drug Possession or Sale
	Rogers, Mandel	Robbery
	Stevenson, Macen	Drug Possession or Sale
	Thurman, Joe	Drug Possession or Sale
	Trujillo, Nicolas	Drug Possession or Sale
	Vasquez, Gerardo	Drug Possession or Sale
	Vasquez, Rogelio	Drug Possession or Sale
	West, Mark	Drug Possession or Sale
	Whitehead, Ronnie	Drug Possession or Sale
2015	Polk, Eric	Drug Possession or Sale
	Stiers, Donald	Drug Possession or Sale

The New York County District Attorney's Office Conviction Review Program

(Manhattan, New York), founded in 2010, 4 exonerations

2012	Nnodimele, Martin	Robbery
	Sarita, Danny	Assault
	Vasquez, Michael	Robbery
2013	O'Neal, Johnnie	Sexual Assault

Brooklyn District Attorney's Conviction Review Unit*(Brooklyn, New York), founded in 2011, 13 exonerations*

2012	Williams, Lawrence	Assault
2013	Ranta, David	Murder
2014	Austin, Darryl	Murder
	Fleming, Jonathan	Murder
	Hill, Robert	Murder
	Jennette, Alvena	Murder
	Logan, Roger	Murder
	Lopez, William	Murder
	McCallum, David	Murder
	Stuckey, Willie	Murder
	Wilson, Sharrif	Murder
	Yarbough, Anthony	Murder
2015	Hamilton, Derrick	Murder

Cook County State's Attorney's Office Conviction Integrity Unit*(Chicago, Illinois), founded in 2012, 10 exonerations*

2012	Nash, Alprentiss	Murder
2013	Boyd, Latherial	Murder
	Chatman, Carl	Sexual Assault
	Harris, Nicole	Murder
	Munoz, Cesar	Murder
	Taylor, Daniel	Murder
2014	Gardner, Lewis	Murder
	Patrick, Deon	Murder
	Phillips, Paul	Murder
	Simon, Alstory	Murder

Office of the State's Attorney for Baltimore City Conviction Integrity Unit*(Baltimore, Maryland), founded in 2012, 3 exonerations*

2014	Burgess, Sabein	Murder
	Lomax, Walter	Murder
	Mooney, John	Murder

2. Offices that have not had CIU exonerations, by year of founding

Lake County State's Attorney's Office Case Review Panel

(Waukegan, Illinois), founded in 2013

Oneida County District Attorney's Conviction Integrity Review Panel

(Utica, New York), founded in 2013

Cuyahoga County Office of the Prosecutor Conviction Integrity Unit

(Cleveland, Ohio), founded in 2014

Multnomah County District Attorney, Post-Conviction Deputy District Attorney

(Portland, Oregon), founded in 2014

Office of the District Attorney, City of Philadelphia Conviction Review Unit

(Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), founded in 2014

Pima County Attorney's Conviction Integrity Unit

(Tucson, Arizona), founded in 2014

United States Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia Conviction Integrity Unit

(Federal), founded in 2014

Yolo County District Attorney Conviction Integrity Unit

(Woodland, California), founded in 2014

The National Registry
of
EXONERATIONS

ILLUSTRATIVE EXONERATIONS IN 2014

These 7 cases (including 11 exonerees) illustrate some of the factors in exonerations in 2014:

- In two of the exonerations no crime had actually occurred.
- One case had a female exoneree.
- Two of the exonerees pled guilty to the crimes for which they were later exonerated.
- One of the exonerations involved a federal prosecution.
- In one case, three exonerees were sentenced to death.



[Ricky Jackson](#), [Kwame Ajamu](#) and [Wiley Bridgeman](#)

State: *Ohio*

Crime: *Murder, Attempted Murder and Robbery*

Convicted: *1975*

Exonerated: *2014*

Key Factors: *False Accusation, Official Misconduct, Death Penalty, Longest Incarceration of an Exoneree*

Ricky Jackson (pictured) was convicted of murder, attempted murder and robbery in 1975, along with brothers Wiley and Ronnie Bridgeman. After spending 39 years in prison – the longest period of incarceration of any known exoneree – Jackson was exonerated in 2014 when the sole eyewitness came forward and admitted he had not seen the crime.

In 1975, two men attempted to rob a salesman who left a grocery store. When he resisted, they shot him twice in the chest and fired a shot into the store, wounding the owner's wife.

Twelve-year-old Eddie Vernon was on a bus near the crime and heard the shots. Like the other passengers on the bus, he was unable to see the crime. Shortly afterward, he heard rumors on the street that Jackson and the Bridgeman brothers were responsible for the shooting. Believing he was helping the police and “doing the right thing,” he told the police that he had witnessed Jackson and the Bridgeman brothers commit the crime. Years later he testified that he had tried to recant his testimony prior to the trial, but the police had told him that if he changed his story they would arrest his parents for his perjury, because he himself was too young to charge. As a result, Vernon testified against all three co-defendants.

Vernon's testimony was inconsistent and no other evidence linked any of the three defendants to the crime. Even so – and despite alibi witnesses who testified that the defendants were not at the scene of the crime – all three were convicted and sentenced to death.

In 2011, the *Cleveland Scene* magazine published an article about the case highlighting the inconsistencies in the testimony and the lack of any other evidence linking any of the three defendants to the crime. At the time, Vernon refused to talk to the reporter. Two years later, Vernon confessed the lie to his pastor.

The Ohio Innocence Project began reinvestigating the case and discovered that evidence pointing to other suspects was ignored once Vernon identified Jackson and the Bridgeman brothers. The Project filed a motion for a new trial. At a hearing on the motion in November 2014, Vernon testified that the police fed him the details that he testified to at the trial, and said: “I don’t have any knowledge about what happened at the scene of the crime...Everything was a lie. They were all lies.”

At the conclusion of the hearing Cuyahoga County prosecutor Timothy McGinty moved to dismiss the charges against Jackson and Wiley Bridgeman. Jackson had served 39 years, three months and nine days, the longest of any known exoneree. In December 2014, the prosecution dismissed the charges against Ronnie Bridgeman, who had changed his name to Kwame Ajamu and who had been released on parole in 2003.



Nathan Jacobson

State: *Federal- California*

Crime: *Fraud*

Convicted: *2008*

Exonerated: *2014*

Key Factors: *Federal Prosecution, Guilty Plea, Inadequate Legal Defense, No Crime*

In May 2008, Nathan Jacobson pled guilty to money laundering. He was exonerated in September 2014.

In July 2007, a federal grand jury in San Diego, California indicted 18 people, including physicians and pharmacists, on charges of participating in a fraudulent internet prescription drug selling scheme. The indictment charged the defendants – including officials of Affpower, a Costa Rican firm – with conspiring to illegally sell more than \$126 million worth of Canadian prescription drugs. Among the defendants was Nathan Jacobson, a Canadian entrepreneur whose credit card processing company handled the online credit transactions for Affpower. Jacobson was charged with money laundering.

Jacobson insisted that he did not know that Affpower’s transactions were fraudulent. He retained a Canadian lawyer, Steven Skurka, who was not admitted to practice law in the U.S. and who believed that the American system of criminal justice was “tyrannical.”

Skurka told Jacobson that he could be convicted even if he did not know that Affpower was committing fraud – a misstatement of the law – and that he was facing a 100-year sentence. Skurka told Jacobson that pleading guilty was his only option.

In May 2008, Jacobson pled guilty to one count of money laundering. Over the next four years, Jacobson provided “detailed and important information on a variety of law enforcement and

intelligence topics, many of them unrelated to the prosecution's investigation" of Affpower, according to a new legal team retained by Jacobson in December 2013.

Jacobson's new legal team obtained documents from the prosecution that had not previously been disclosed, and that Skurka had not sought. Based on the documents, the defense filed a motion to withdraw Jacobson's guilty plea because "[o]ther than non-controversial evidence that Mr. Jacobson... provided credit card processing services to Affpower affiliates – information that Mr. Jacobson shared with federal agents himself – there is precious little about Mr. Jacobson, and certainly nothing that persuasively establishes his guilt."

The documents, according to the defense, showed that Jacobson had no day-to-day involvement in the operation of the credit card processing business. Moreover, Jacobson had traveled to Costa Rica to meet with Affpower officials who assured him they were operating legally. On two occasions in 2006, Jacobson spoke with a principal official of Affpower, who was secretly cooperating with the prosecution. The official attempted to draw Jacobson into a conversation that would suggest he knew of irregularities, but Jacobson only said he expected the business to run properly. "You'll just have to make sure the business is cleaner than clean," Jacobson said on a recording of one conversation.

The defense presented evidence that Jacobson had worked with the Canadian International Pharmacy Association for years to regulate distance-based delivery of pharmaceuticals. The defense also noted that before Jacobson was ever indicted, he had helped the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration crack down on illegal e-commerce in Costa Rica.

On September 15, 2014, U.S. District Court Judge Janis Sammartino granted the defense motion and Jacobson withdrew his guilty plea. The prosecution then dismissed the charges.



Daniel Larsen

State: *California*

Crime: *Possession of a Concealed Weapon*

Convicted: *1999*

Exonerated: *2014*

Key Factors: *Mistaken Witness ID, Inadequate Legal Defense*

(Larsen, right, pictured with wife Christine and attorney Jan Stilglitz)

Daniel Larsen was convicted of possession of a concealed weapon in 1999. Because he had two prior felony convictions, he was sentenced under California's Three Strikes law to 28 years to life in prison. He was exonerated in 2014 after nearly 15 years.

In 1998, a 911 caller reported a fight in a parking lot and said a man was brandishing a knife. When the officers arrived, they purportedly saw Larsen throw a knife under a car and arrested him, even though he did not match the description given by the caller.

Larsen was charged with possession of a concealed weapon, but after his preliminary hearing, a

judge dismissed the charge because there was no evidence of concealment. The prosecutor charged Larsen again, and at a second preliminary hearing the officer who had identified Larsen changed his testimony so that the charge would stick. At Larsen's trial in 1999, he was convicted based on police testimony.

In 2004, the California Innocence Project at California Western School of Law began working on Larsen's case. In 2005, after Larsen's conviction had been upheld on appeal, he filed a state petition for a writ of habeas corpus, alleging that he had received a constitutionally inadequate legal defense because his trial lawyer—who was later disbarred—failed to investigate the case before trial, failed to discover witnesses who would have testified that Larsen did not have a knife, and failed to request that the knife be examined for fingerprints.

Attached to the petition were declarations from witnesses. James McNutt, a retired Army sergeant and a former police chief, said in his declaration that he was at the crime scene and saw a man named William Hewitt throw the knife under a car. Hewitt's girlfriend said that Hewitt told her he had thrown the knife, and that Hewitt had sold his motorcycle to get money for Larsen's bond because he felt guilty that Larsen had been charged. Hewitt's declaration also said the knife was his and Larsen had not thrown it under the car. The petition was denied and the denial was upheld on appeal.

In 2008, Larsen filed a federal petition for a writ of habeas corpus. The prosecution argued that the petition was filed after the one-year filing deadline. The federal court ordered a hearing to determine whether Larsen's case qualified for an exception to the deadline for a defendant who can establish actual innocence. At the 2009 hearing, McNutt testified that Larsen did not possess or throw a knife that night, and identified Hewitt as the man who threw the knife.

The judge found that Larsen was actually innocent and qualified for the exception to the one-year deadline, and that Larsen's lawyer had failed to provide an adequate legal defense. The judge vacated Larsen's conviction and ordered a new trial. In March 2013, Larsen was released on bond while the case was on appeal by the prosecution.

In September 2013, the Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals upheld the ruling. In January 2014, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office dismissed the charge.



David McCallum and **Willie Stuckey**

State: *New York*

Crime: *Murder, Robbery, Kidnapping and Illegal Use of a Weapon*

Convicted: *1986*

Exonerated: *2014*

Key Factors: *False Confession, DNA, False Accusation, Official Misconduct, Posthumous Exoneration, Conviction Integrity Unit*

In 1986, David McCallum (pictured) and Willie Stuckey, both 16, were convicted of murder, robbery, kidnapping and illegal use of a weapon after a man was abducted and murdered in Brooklyn, New York. McCallum and Stuckey were exonerated in 2014 after the Brooklyn District Attorney's Conviction Review Unit reinvestigated the case.

The crime began with a kidnapping in 1985. Witnesses saw a man force Nathan Blenner into his car. Blenner's body was found the next day in a park with a single gunshot wound to the head. A security guard found Blenner's car two days later. Initially, the police had no leads for the murder, but then, during an interview with people in the area, a potential witness told police that Stuckey had recently given away a gun that he claimed had been used to kill someone.

Stuckey and his friend McCallum were brought in for questioning. Both ultimately confessed, although their confessions did not match each other or the medical examiner's autopsy findings. Stuckey and McCallum both said later that the detectives had slapped them during the interrogation.

No physical or forensic evidence tied either teenager to the murder. They were convicted at separate jury trials and each was sentenced to 25 years to life.

Stuckey died of a heart attack in prison in 2001 after 14 years behind bars. McCallum continued to appeal his case.

In 2011, McCallum's attorney asked Kings County (Brooklyn) District Attorney Charles Hynes to submit the case to his Conviction Review Unit. Hynes informed McCallum's attorney that the Conviction Review Unit had determined that there was no credible evidence of innocence.

After Kenneth Thompson was elected District Attorney of Kings County in November 2013, McCallum's attorney asked him to take a fresh look at the case. Subsequently, DNA tests were performed on cigarette butts and a marijuana roach that had been found in Blenner's car; Blenner had not permitted smoking in his car. Neither Stuckey's nor McCallum's DNA was found, but a DNA profile that matched a man with a criminal record was developed. The reinvestigation also turned up evidence of alternate suspects who were known to police at the time of the initial investigation, but whose existence was not disclosed to the defense.

In October 2014, Thompson moved the Kings County, New York, Supreme Court to vacate the convictions of both McCallum and Stuckey, and then dismissed the charges, telling the press, "I inherited a legacy of disgrace with respect to wrongful convictions."



[Henry McCollum](#) and [Leon Brown](#)

State: *North Carolina*

Crime: *Murder and Rape*

Convicted: *1984*

Exonerated: *2014* **Key Factors:** *False Confession, DNA, Official Misconduct, Death Penalty*

Teenagers Henry McCollum (in photo) and his half-brother Leon Brown were convicted of rape and murder in 1984 in North Carolina, and both were sentenced to death. They were exonerated in 2014 after nearly 31 years in prison.

Under interrogation, both mentally-handicapped teenage defendants confessed to the October 1983 abduction, rape and murder of 11-year-old Sabrina Buie in Red Springs, North Carolina.

Over the years, both men continued to challenge their convictions. During a reinvestigation of the case, defense lawyers discovered that three days prior to the 1984 trial, police had asked the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigations to compare fingerprints from beer cans found at the crime scene to those of Roscoe Artis, another suspect who had committed similar crimes. There were no documents indicating whether that comparison had been performed, and the request had not been disclosed to defense lawyers for McCollum and Brown.

In fact, just three weeks after Sabrina Buie was murdered, the body of 18-year-old Joann Brockman was found in Red Springs. She had been raped and strangled. Witnesses at the time recalled seeing Brockman in the company of Artis a short while before she went missing. Artis was convicted of that crime and sentenced to death in the summer of 1984.

In 2004, in response to a request from McCollum, DNA testing was ordered on a cigarette butt found near Buie's body. A DNA profile was obtained; it did not match the DNA profiles of either Brown or McCollum.

In 2010, the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission began investigating the case at the request of Brown's attorneys. The Commission submitted the DNA profile from the cigarette butt to the North Carolina state police DNA database; it matched that of Roscoe Artis, who by that time was serving a sentence of life in prison after his death sentence had been set aside on appeal.

The defense then discovered that Artis had been convicted for assaulting women before the murder of Sabrina Buie, and that at the time he moved to Red Springs, Artis was wanted for a 1980 rape-murder in Gaston County, North Carolina. The defense also learned that before Artis's sentence was commuted to life in prison in 1989, he repeatedly told another inmate that McCollum and Brown were innocent.

McCollum's and Brown's attorneys presented this information in a motion requesting that their convictions be vacated and charges dismissed. In September 2014, the motion was granted and McCollum and Brown were released after nearly 31 years in prison.



Michelle Murphy

State: *Oklahoma*

Crime: *Murder*

Convicted: *1995*

Exonerated: *2014*

Key Factors: *Female, False Confession, DNA, Official Misconduct*

In 1995, 17-year-old Michelle Murphy was convicted of murdering her 15-week-old son. She discovered the baby lying in a pool of his own blood in her kitchen with puncture wounds to his chest and neck. After nearly 20 years, she was exonerated in 2014 when DNA tests on the blood at the scene found a DNA profile that did not match Murphy or the baby.

In the pre-dawn hours of September 12, 1994, a neighborhood boy called police to report that he heard Murphy and her husband arguing in their townhouse. The boy later told police that he walked by the house again about an hour and a half later and saw Murphy holding the baby, who was still alive. He told police that he then went around the house and peered in the windows of the kitchen where he saw the baby in a pool of blood. Because the boy died prior to the trial, a tape recording of his testimony at a preliminary hearing was played for the jury. The jury also heard a recording of Murphy's statement to police eight hours after she found her son's body, in which she confessed to a set of improbable facts. She said that she had leaned over while holding a knife and accidentally stabbed the baby. No knife was ever found.

Murphy was ultimately exonerated by blood at the crime scene. At the time of trial, serology tests performed on blood collected from the crime scene revealed type AB blood. Murphy was type A and the baby was type O, which means that at least some of the blood must have come from someone else. A forensic analyst falsely testified at the trial that Murphy could not be excluded as the source of the AB blood. Despite the laboratory reports, the prosecutor suggested to the jury in closing argument that Murphy's blood was found at the scene and that it was proof that she had killed the baby.

Murphy was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without parole. Her daughter was put up for adoption.

Nearly 20 years later, attorneys Richard and Sharisse O'Carroll, with the help of the New York-based Innocence Project, reinvestigated the case. They discovered the false testimony about the blood analysis and learned that the detective who interrogated Murphy was responsible for a false confession in another case in contradiction to his trial testimony. Their request for DNA testing was granted and showed what the prosecution had known all along – the AB type blood belonged to someone other than Murphy or her baby. The prosecution dismissed the charges in September 2014, and Judge William Kellough declared Murphy factually innocent.



Michael Phillips

State: *Texas*

Crime: *Rape*

Convicted: *1990*

Exonerated: *2014*

Key Factors: *Mistaken Cross-Racial ID, Guilty Plea, DNA, Inadequate Legal Defense, Conviction Integrity Unit*

(Phillips, left, pictured with then Dallas District Attorney Craig Watkins)

Michael Phillips, an African American man, pled guilty in 1990 to raping a 16-year-old white woman. He was exonerated in 2014 through the efforts of the Dallas County Conviction Integrity Unit's first-of-its-kind Systematic DNA Testing Project, a project designed to identify false convictions in sexual assault cases by DNA testing in cases in which the defendants were not seeking such tests.

In Phillips' case, the victim reported to police that she had been raped in her apartment by a man in a ski mask. She said she bit the man's hand and also pulled up his mask briefly so that she could see part of his face. A month later, she identified Phillips as her attacker in a photographic lineup. Cross-racial identifications are known to pose a higher risk of mistaken identifications than same-race identifications.

Phillips' attorney advised him against going to trial because, he said, a jury would not believe the word of a black man over that of a white woman. Fearing a longer sentence if convicted after a trial, Phillips pled guilty and was sentenced to 12 years in prison.

After serving his entire sentence, he sought DNA testing in 2002. When that request was denied, Phillips gave up trying to prove his innocence.

In 2007, Michigan Law School professor Samuel Gross, the Editor of the National Registry of Exonerations, contacted the Dallas County Conviction Integrity Unit and suggested that the office undertake a project to systematically search for cases in which DNA testing could determine the guilt or innocence of defendants who were not seeking exoneration. In 2009, the project was approved.

Through this project, the rape kit in Phillips' case was tested and a male profile that was not Phillips' was identified. The profile was uploaded into the FBI's Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) and it matched the DNA of a man serving a prison sentence in Texas. The Dallas District Attorney's Office notified Phillips, who was living in a nursing home and did not know that his case was being reinvestigated. In August 2014, his conviction was vacated and the charge was dismissed. This was the first DNA exoneration in the United States that was identified by a systematic search of old criminal convictions that no party was actively challenging.

Then Dallas District Attorney Craig Watkins explained, "...this was a methodical approach that can be replicated nationwide...Untested rape kits should not just sit on a shelf and collect dust. The exoneration continues to expose the past weakness in our criminal justice system."