



THE NATIONAL REGISTRY  
OF EXONERATIONS

# 2024 ANNUAL REPORT

THE NATIONAL REGISTRY OF EXONERATIONS | April 2, 2025

A PROJECT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA IRVINE NEWKIRK CENTER  
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## 2024 ANNUAL REPORT

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## MAIN FINDINGS

**Exonerations.** The Registry recorded 147 exonerations that occurred in 2024.

**Official Misconduct.** Official misconduct occurred in at least 104 exonerations in 2024. Sixty-seven homicide cases—79% of the 85 homicide exonerations in 2024—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. IOs took part in 53 exonerations, and CIUs helped secure 62 exonerations. IOs and CIUs worked together on 22 exonerations in 2024, 15% of the total. Overall, 93 (63%) of the exonerations in 2024 involved a professional exonerator.

**No-crime cases.** Of the 147 exonerations in 2024, 35% were no-crime cases. These 51 exonerations include wrongful convictions for drug possession, murder, and child sex abuse.

**Race and wrongful convictions.** Seventy-eight percent of exonerations last year (115/147) were people of color. Nearly 60 percent of the exonerees (87/147) were Black. For a larger discussion on the role of race in wrongful convictions, please see our [2022 report](#) on the subject.

**Years Lost to Wrongful Imprisonment.** Persons exonerated in 2024 lost an average of 13.5 years to wrongful imprisonment for crimes they did not commit—over 1,980 years in total.

**Compensation.** Payments in the form of state compensation or civil damage awards to exonerees since 1989 now exceed \$4.6 billion.

## CRIMES

**Homicide:** Eighty-five defendants were exonerated of homicide—81 for murder, and four for manslaughter. Four exonerated defendants from 2024 had been sentenced to death.

**Sexual Assault:** Nine defendants were exonerated of sexual offenses; four in cases where the principal crime was sexual assault of an adult, and five where the principal crime was child sexual abuse.

**Other Violent Crimes:** Sixteen defendants were exonerated for other violent crimes, such as assault, robbery, and attempted murder.

**Non-Violent Crimes:** Thirty-seven defendants were exonerated of non-violent offenses, including one misdemeanor.

## CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

**Official Misconduct:** We know of official misconduct in 104, or 71% of exonerations that occurred in 2024. Most of these cases involved more than one kind of misconduct, such as the failure to disclose exculpatory evidence to the defense (95 cases), witness tampering (43 cases), perjury by an official actor (39 cases), knowing presentation of perjured testimony (11), police misconduct in interrogations (9), prosecutorial dishonesty in court (8), or forensic misconduct (5).

**Mistaken Witness Identification:** Thirty-eight exonerations in 2024 (26%) were for convictions based at least in part on mistaken witness identifications.

**False Confessions:** Twenty-two exonerations (15%) involved false confessions.

**Perjury or False Accusation:** One hundred and six cases (72%) included perjury or other false accusations.

**False or Misleading Forensic Evidence:** Forty-two cases (29%) involved forensic evidence that was false or misleading.

**Ineffective Assistance of Counsel:** Forty-eight cases (33%) included inadequate legal defense.

## GROUP EXONERATIONS

We published two cases, representing 54 individuals, in our Groups Registry. In each of these cases, the exonerations are tied together by a pattern of systematic official misconduct either in the investigation and prosecution of these cases or committed by an official actor involved in the case.

## BASIC PATTERNS

The National Registry of Exonerations added 196 exonerations in 2024. We recorded 147 exonerations that occurred in 2024, and we added 49 exonerations that happened in previous years.

**Throughout this report, we've highlighted several exonerations from the past year. They are remarkable accounts of these individuals' persistence and determination in the face of injustice.**

All told, the National Registry of Exonerations has recorded 3,646 exonerations in the United States from 1989 through the end of 2024.

## EXONERATIONS BY JURISDICTION

In 2024, there were 141 exonerations in 28 states and six from federal courts. (Table 1) Texas had the most exonerations (26), followed by Illinois (20). New York and Pennsylvania each had 15.

**Table 1: Exonerations in 2024 by Jurisdiction (n=147)**

|               |                 |                  |                 |
|---------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Arizona - 1   | Kansas—2        | Mississippi—1    | Oregon—1        |
| California—11 | Louisiana—1     | Montana—1        | Pennsylvania—15 |
| Connecticut—6 | Maryland—3      | New Jersey—2     | Rhode Island—1  |
| Florida—3     | Massachusetts—1 | New Mexico—2     | Tennessee—4     |
| Idaho—1       | Michigan—8      | New York—15      | Texas—26        |
| Illinois—20   | Minnesota—1     | North Carolina—2 | Virginia—3      |
| Indiana—1     | Missouri—2      | Ohio—5           | Wisconsin—2     |
| Federal—6     |                 |                  |                 |

As in previous years, a few states accounted for more than half of the total exonerations. Also consistent with patterns over the last several years, a cluster of drug crime exonerations following the discovery of police corruption drove the high numbers in the leading state. The 26 Texas exonerations include 17 cases tied to the misconduct of Gerald Goines, a former narcotics officer with the Houston Police Department.

Illinois fell from the top spot, which it held for the last six years. Over the last several years, most Illinois exonerations were of drug cases involving disgraced police sergeant Ronald Watts. The discovery of Sgt. Watts's corruption has led to the exonerations of more than 200 people who had been falsely convicted of possessing drugs and weapons that Watts and his fellow officers planted. There was just one exoneration in a Watts case

in 2024. The other 19 Illinois exonerations involved murder (17), manslaughter (1), and attempted murder (1). Seventeen of Illinois's 20 exonerations were from Cook County (Chicago).

All 15 Pennsylvania exonerations were from Philadelphia, and eight of those cases involved post-conviction work by the Philadelphia County District Attorney's Conviction Integrity Unit (CIU). In New York, nine of the 15 exonerations in 2024 are from the five boroughs of New York City.



#### **KERRY MAX COOK**

**STATE:** Texas | **Crime:** Murder  
**CONVICTED:** 1978 | **Exonerated:** 2024

**CONTRIBUTING FACTORS:** Mistaken Witness ID, False or Misleading Forensic Evidence, Perjury or False Accusation, Official Misconduct

**Kerry Max Cook** was convicted twice and twice sentenced to death for the murder of a young woman in Tyler, Texas, in 1978. After winning a new trial in 1997, Cook agreed to plead guilty in 1999 to murder and be released on time served. Two months later, DNA results tied the woman's former lover to genetic evidence found in her underwear. For the next 25 years, Cook sought to clear his name and became a leading voice for the wrongfully convicted. On June 19, 2024, the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals ruled that Cook's conviction should be vacated on the grounds of actual innocence. "Several actions of the State go beyond gross negligence and reach into the realm of intentional deception against the tribunal," the ruling said. "Cook spent close to a decade and half on death row from the very beginning based on a web of fabricated testimony and misrepresentations."



#### **SANDRA HEMME**

**STATE:** Missouri | **CRIME:** Murder  
**CONVICTED:** 1981 | **EXONERATED:** 2024

**CONTRIBUTING FACTORS:** False Confession, Official Misconduct, Inadequate Legal Defense

On December 10, 1980, 20-year-old **Sandra Hemme** falsely confessed to a murder in St. Joseph, Missouri. She was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. When her case was dismissed on December 3, 2024, she had served more than 43 years in prison, the longest amount of time for an exonerated woman in U.S. history. The conviction was vacated based on the discovery of exculpatory evidence that the prosecution had not disclosed at the time that Hemme pled guilty. A post-conviction investigation showed that Hemme's defense attorney at the time of conviction had failed to investigate Hemme's history of mental health issues to show that her confession was false.

## THE CRIMES OF CONVICTION

**The Crimes for which the Defendants Were Convicted.** Almost three-quarters (110/147) of the exonerations in 2024 were for violent crimes. We entered 85 homicide exonerations, which accounted for 58 percent of the total and 77 percent of violent crimes. See Table 2 for a breakdown of exonerations by crime.

**Table 2: Exonerations in 2024 by Crime**

|                                     |                   |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Homicide</b>                     | <b>85 (58%)</b>   |
| <i>Murder</i>                       | 81                |
| <i>Manslaughter</i>                 | 4                 |
| <b>Sex Crimes</b>                   | <b>9 (6%)</b>     |
| <i>Sexual assault (on an adult)</i> | 4                 |
| <i>Child sex abuse</i>              | 5                 |
| <b>Other Violent Crimes</b>         | <b>16 (11%)</b>   |
| <i>Robbery</i>                      | 3                 |
| <i>Attempted murder</i>             | 7                 |
| <i>Assault</i>                      | 1                 |
| <i>Other violent</i>                | 5                 |
| <b>Non-Violent Crimes</b>           | <b>37 (25%)</b>   |
| <i>Drug crimes</i>                  | 23                |
| <i>Weapons possession/sale</i>      | 1                 |
| <i>Other non-violent</i>            | 13                |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                        | <b>147 (100%)</b> |



### CHARLOTTE PLEYTEZ

**STATE:** California | **CRIME:** Murder  
**CONVICTED:** 2009 | **Exonerated:** 2024

**CONTRIBUTING FACTORS:** Mistaken Witness Identification, False or Misleading Forensic Evidence

**Charlotte Pleytez** was 20 years old when she was accused of committing a murder in the West Hollywood neighborhood of Los Angeles, California. In 2009, she and Lombardo Palacios, who was 15 at the time of the crime, were convicted based on a mistaken witness identification. Pleytez and Palacios were sentenced to 50 years to life in prison. They were exonerated in December 2024 based on evidence that identified the real perpetrators of the crime.



### GILBERT MERRITT III

**STATE:** Virginia | **CRIME:** Murder  
**CONVICTED:** 2001 | **EXONERATED:** 2024

**CONTRIBUTING FACTORS:** Perjury or False Accusation, Official Misconduct

No eyewitnesses placed **Gilbert Merritt III** at the convenience store in Norfolk, Virginia, where a murder occurred in 2001, and there was no physical evidence connecting him to the crime. But an acquaintance of Merritt falsely testified that Merritt had confessed his involvement and said it was in retaliation for the shooting of his brother. After Merritt's conviction, the witness recanted and said she was coerced into testifying by Detective Glenn Ford, who was also the lead detective in the wrongful convictions of the so-called Norfolk Four and was convicted of perjury and other charges in 2010. Merritt first received a conditional pardon by Governor Ralph Northam in 2022, and was fully exonerated in February 2024, after the Virginia Supreme Court affirmed the Norfolk City Circuit Court's order granting his habeas petition.

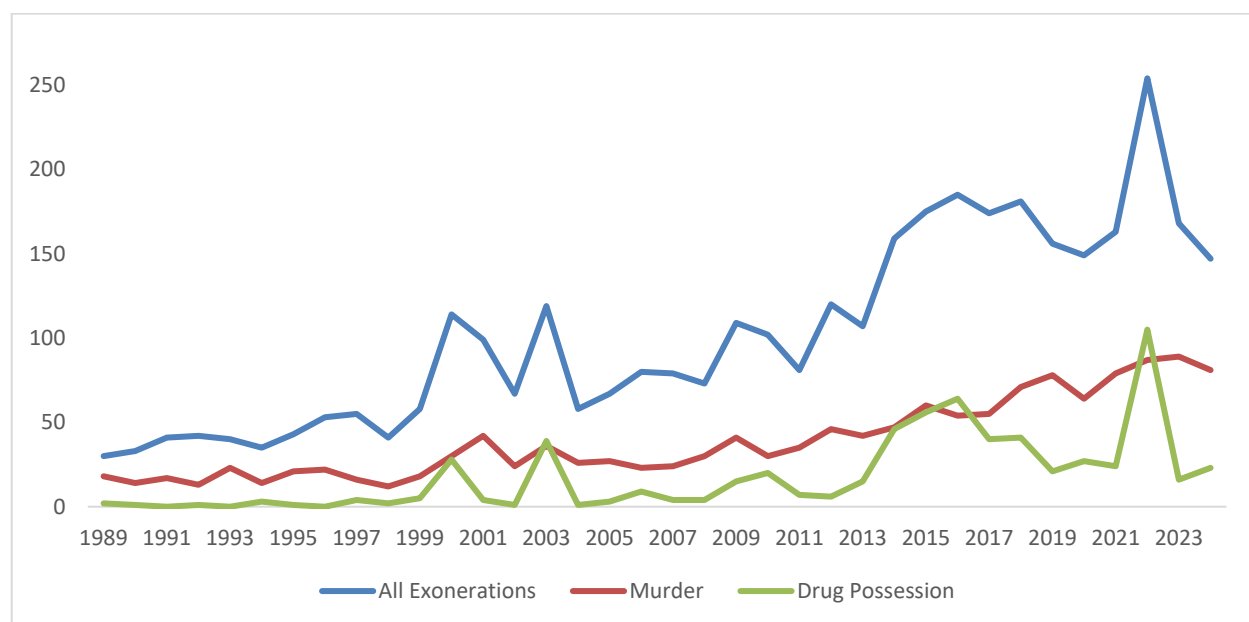
## ANALYSIS OF 2024 EXONERATIONS AND LONG-TERM TRENDS

As of March 1, 2025, the Registry added 147 exonerations that occurred in 2024, about average over the last 10 years—except for two years ago, 2022, when we added more than 250. There have been ups and downs like this before. As we have explained in prior years' reports, the peaks are driven by clusters of drug exonerations. The biggest was in 2022, with 105 drug crime exonerations in a single year, 99 of them in Cook County, Illinois

(Chicago). In 2024, a smaller cluster of 17 occurred in Harris County, Texas (Houston), pushing Texas to the top of the list. The last time Texas had the most exonerations in a single year was 2016. That capped a four-year period when nearly 200 defendants were cleared of drug possession convictions after the Harris County CIU discovered that scores of people had pled guilty to drug possession before lab results came back showing that what they had possessed were not, in fact, controlled substances.

While drug exonerations explain much of the year-to-year variability in the number of exonerations, murder remains the largest category of exonerations in the Registry, with 39% of the total (1,410/3,659) and nearly half of the non-drug crime exonerations. Murder exonerations, which involve higher stakes and require substantially more time and effort to achieve, better reflect long-term trends in exonerations. As we see in Figure 1, the number per year has steadily risen since 1989. Drug-crimes convictions are the next largest group, with fewer than half as many exonerations as murders (639/3,659)—and a pattern that is far more variable. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Number of Exonerations by Year**



Another persistent trend is the important role that professional exonerators—CIUs and IOs—play in exonerations. As shown in Figure 2, CIUs and IOs have participated in an increasingly larger share of exonerations over the years. The number of exonerations procured without the help of professional exonerators is relatively stable since 1989, with a few spikes in the late 1990s and early 2000s. We cannot know how many of the exonerations involving professional exonerators would have happened even without their involvement, but these data suggest that the increase in the number of exonerations annually over the past ten to 15 years is driven at least in some part by the proliferation of CIUs and IOs. Whether that trend will continue is unclear, given the 2024 election of new head prosecutors in several of the largest prosecutorial districts with active CIU units, including Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston.

**Figure 2: Professional Exonerators' Involvement as Share of Exonerations**

