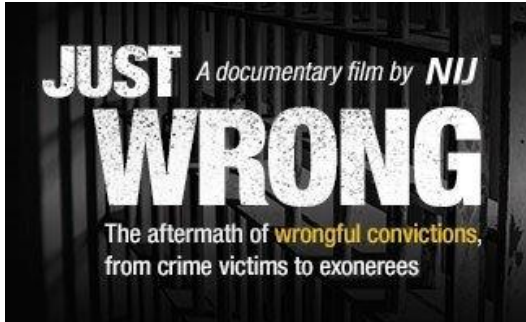


Movie Kit



American
Spaces

Just Wrong: The Aftermath of Wrongful Convictions, From Crime Victims to Exonerees



Produced by: The National Institute of Justice

Year of release: 2017

Length: 20 min

English level: High

Themes: Human Rights, Rule of Law, Anti-Corruption, Government Transparency

Link to video: <https://nij.gov/multimedia/Pages/video-just-wrong.aspx>

Context (from the National Institute of Justice (www.nij.gov))

The documentary ***Just Wrong: The Aftermath of Wrongful Convictions, From Crime Victims to Exonerees*** chronicles the experiences of six individuals whose lives were impacted by wrongful convictions. We are introduced to:

- Three exonerees who spent decades in prison for crimes they did not commit
- Three crime victims whose lives were deeply impacted by wrongful convictions

The strength of any criminal justice system depends on its ability to convict the guilty and clear the innocent. But we know that innocent people are sometimes wrongfully convicted and the guilty remain free to victimize others. The consequences of a wrongful conviction are far-reaching for both the wrongfully convicted and the survivors and victims of the original crimes.

Watch ***Just Wrong*** to see how their lives were interrupted and the challenges they face.

Key Vocabulary

- **Appeal** – a legal proceeding in which a case is brought before a higher court to review a decision of a lower court
- **Conviction** – an official decision in a court of law that someone is guilty of a crime
- **DNA Testing** – DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) is the hereditary material in humans and almost all other organisms. Every person's DNA is unique to the individual. DNA testing analyzes evidence to determine if the DNA found at a crime scene matches the DNA of someone suspected of the crime
- **Exoneree** – a person found to be **not** guilty of a crime for which the individual was previously convicted. An exoneration occurs when a person who has been convicted of a crime is officially cleared based on new evidence of innocence.
- **Expunge** – to delete, to remove from someone's record
- **Felony** – a serious crime, often involving violence that is punishable by more than one year of imprisonment
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** – a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary or dangerous event.
- **Wrongful Conviction** – occurs when a person is found guilty of a crime in a court of law, but through further investigation, it is discovered the person did not actually commit the crime. The individuals are in fact innocent, but have been wrongly convicted by a jury or other court of law.

The Six People Profiled in *Just Wrong: The Aftermath of Wrongful Convictions*

Tomeshia Artis: Crime survivor who was raped at age 12. The police misplaced the DNA evidence and Ms. Artis mistakenly identified a man who served seventeen years in prison for a crime he did not commit. She now suffers from anxiety.

Peggy “Peppy” Carter: Mother of a crime victim. Ms. Carter’s teenage daughter Debbie was murdered and two men were convicted, both serving time in prison for the crime. New evidence led to their exoneration and indicated that another prisoner was actually guilty of killing Ms. Carter’s daughter. Unfortunately, the real murderer escaped from prison and has never been caught. Ms. Carter suffers from depression and anxiety.

Christy Sheppard: Cousin of a crime victim and Peggy Carter’s niece. Ms. Sheppard is haunted by the murder of her cousin Debbie, the fact that the real murderer was never captured, and that two men served time in prison from a wrongful conviction. She has become an advocate for criminal justice reforms to lessen the chance of wrongful convictions.

Gloria Killian: Wrongfully convicted of a double murder she did not commit in 1986 and sentenced to 32 years to life in prison, Ms. Killian was not exonerated until 16 years later in 2002. A student when she was convicted, Ms. Killian now suffers from depression and depends on others for her financial support.

Fernando Bermudez: Wrongfully convicted of murder and served more than eighteen years for a crime he did not commit. Finally exonerated, Mr. Bermudez then launched a five-year legal struggle against the criminal justice system for compensation for the years he lost while imprisoned. Ultimately, Mr. Bermudez was financially compensated, although he will never get back the lost time.

Gary Drinkard: Wrongfully convicted of murder, Mr. Drinkard was eventually exonerated and now suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after years spent in prison. Accustomed to being confined, he spends most of his time in a small room watching television.

Documentary Background and Goals

- This documentary was released by the **National Institute of Justice (NIJ)**, the research, development and evaluation agency of the **U.S. Department of Justice**. NIJ is dedicated to improving knowledge and understanding of crime and justice issues through science.
- In February 2016, the NIJ, along with partners in the Office of Justice Programs and external organizations, **hosted listening sessions with people impacted by wrongful convictions**, including victims or survivors of wrongful convictions and the individuals who have been exonerated.
- The services offered to victims and exonerees of wrongful convictions are often inadequate. **This film raises awareness and can help policymakers** deal with the specialized needs stemming from wrongful convictions.
- The **NIJ is dedicated to using science to learn** about the causes and consequences of wrongful convictions. **Only with this understanding will we minimize these miscarriages of justice**, support victims and restore their confidence in the justice system.

Key Concepts in the American Criminal Justice System

Rule of Law: The principle that all people and institutions are subject to and accountable to law that is fairly applied and enforced.

Due Process: The Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states that *no one shall be deprived of life, liberty or property without the due process of law*. Under **due process**, each individual has a right to be treated fairly and according to established rules and principles.

The Criminal Justice System consists of three major institutions:

- Law Enforcement – police officers, Federal Bureau of Investigation, etc.
- Court System – attorneys, judges, etc.
- Corrections System – jails, prisons, etc.

A case begins with law enforcement that investigates a crime and gathers evidence to be used against the alleged perpetrator (person who commits a crime). The case continues through the court system, which weighs the evidence to determine if the defendant is **guilty beyond a reasonable doubt**. If so, the corrections system uses its means of incarceration and probation to punish and correct the behavior of the offender.

How Miscarriages of Justice Can Occur

When a **miscarriage of justice** occurs, a wrong decision is made by the court or judicial system, resulting in innocent people getting punished. Some reasons why innocent people may be convicted of crimes they did not commit:

- Ineffective Legal Representation
- Flawed Evidence
- Faulty Eyewitness Identification
- Untruthful Informant
- False Confessions
- Misconduct by Government Actors

Discussion Questions

- What are some reasons people are wrongfully convicted of crimes they did not commit?
- How did the wrongful convictions adversely affect the crime victims in the documentary? What about the innocent people falsely convicted of crimes?
- What are some steps a society's legal system can take to lessen the chance that someone is wrongfully convicted of a crime?
- The documentary mentions that only 30 states provide compensation to the wrongfully convicted and most state services are woefully inadequate. **This documentary was made to raise awareness of this issue and to minimize miscarriages of justice.** If you were a policymaker, what are some steps you may take to address wrongful convictions?
- If you were to make a documentary of an important issue that needs to be resolved in your communities, what issue would you choose?
- How do people raise attention to these issues in your communities?