

Race and Crime

Analysis of the U.S. National Registry of Exonerations

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August 2024

Background

The pursuit of justice is a fundamental pillar of the United States legal system, aiming to hold accountability for the guilty and protection of the innocent. However, the justice system design induces wrongful convictions through eyewitness misidentification, false or misleading forensic evidence, perjury, official misconduct, and inadequate legal defense. The consequences of wrongful conviction are serious and often irreversible, resulting in loss of liberty and damage to the reputation of individuals and their families. Increased scrutiny of criminal cases and efforts of dedicated legal advocates have facilitated the *exoneration* (reversal of conviction and clearing of charges) of numerous individuals who were unjustly convicted. Exoneration brings attention to shortcomings of the criminal justice system and consideration of innocents who are currently imprisoned.

The National Registry of Exonerations is a project from the University of California, Irvine; University of Michigan; and Michigan State University which gathers detailed information on every exoneration in the United States since 1989. Their extensive registry includes personal demographics and describes criminal sentences, time served, and pathway to exoneration. This wealth of information allows researchers, policy-makers, legal practitioners, and the public to analyze trends, identify systemic issues within the criminal justice system, and advocate for reforms aimed at preventing future wrongful convictions.

Objective

In this study, we examine the National Registry of Exonerations from the University of Michigan to analyze individuals exonerated in the United States between 1989 and 2024 through descriptive statistics and statistical modeling. This document and our work are in progress.

Which offenses do we examine?

Table 1: List of high-frequency offenses, by race

Offense	Overall, N = 2,640	Black, N = 1,415	White, N = 785	Hispanic, N = 373	Asian, N = 27	Native American, N = 21	Other, N = 19
Murder	875 (33%)	496 (35%)	226 (29%)	137 (37%)	4 (15%)	8 (38%)	4 (21%)
Drug Possession or Sale	601 (23%)	433 (31%)	85 (11%)	78 (21%)	3 (11%)	1 (4.8%)	1 (5.3%)

Offense	Overall, N = 2,640	Black, N = 1,415	White, N = 785	Hispanic, N = 373	Asian, N = 27	Native American, N = 21	Other, N = 19
Child Sex Abuse	228 (8.6%)	60 (4.2%)	138 (18%)	24 (6.4%)	3 (11%)	2 (9.5%)	1 (5.3%)
Sexual Assault	195 (7.4%)	101 (7.1%)	73 (9.3%)	17 (4.6%)	0 (0%)	2 (9.5%)	2 (11%)
Robbery	142 (5.4%)	94 (6.6%)	23 (2.9%)	22 (5.9%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.8%)	2 (11%)
Assault	98 (3.7%)	40 (2.8%)	33 (4.2%)	23 (6.2%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.8%)	1 (5.3%)

Table 1 shows the highest-frequency criminal offenses across groups of race. For example, we read the top-left-most cell as reporting that, among the 2,640 individuals in the National Registry of Exonerations whose alleged crime occurred during or after 1989, 875 or 33% were exonerated from a Murder conviction. Percents are column-wise.

Table 2: Total years spent incarcerated and convicted, by offense

Offense	Incarcerated (17,086 total)	Convicted (24,318 total)
Murder	10,979 (64%)	12,071 (50%)
Child Sex Abuse	1,504 (9%)	2,077 (9%)
Sexual Assault	1,480 (9%)	1,865 (8%)
Robbery	789 (5%)	1,080 (4%)
Attempted Murder	606 (4%)	744 (3%)
Drug Possession or Sale	546 (3%)	4,018 (17%)
Assault	227 (1%)	403 (2%)
Manslaughter	207 (1%)	359 (1%)
Kidnapping	153 (1%)	184 (1%)
Weapon Possession or Sale	126 (1%)	264 (1%)

Table 2 shows the criminal offenses that account for the most time spent wrongfully incarcerated/convicted. For example, we read the top-left-most cell as reporting that, among the 17,086 years spent wrongfully incarcerated across all individuals in the National Registry of Exonerations whose alleged crime occurred during or after 1989, 10,979 or 64% were due to a Murder conviction. Again, percents are column-wise.

Table 2 was reproduced for each group of race (see Supplementary), which found that this order of offenses accounting for the most years lost to incarceration or conviction are similar across all subsets of races, especially the largest.

These tables motivate us to compare the experience of people convicted of these popular and severe offenses between groups of race, so as to measure the extent to which sentence/incarceration is associated with race, within the National Registry of Exonerations.

Analysis

Distribution of years spent incarcerated and convicted, by offense and race

Distribution of age at events, by offense and race

Document in progress.