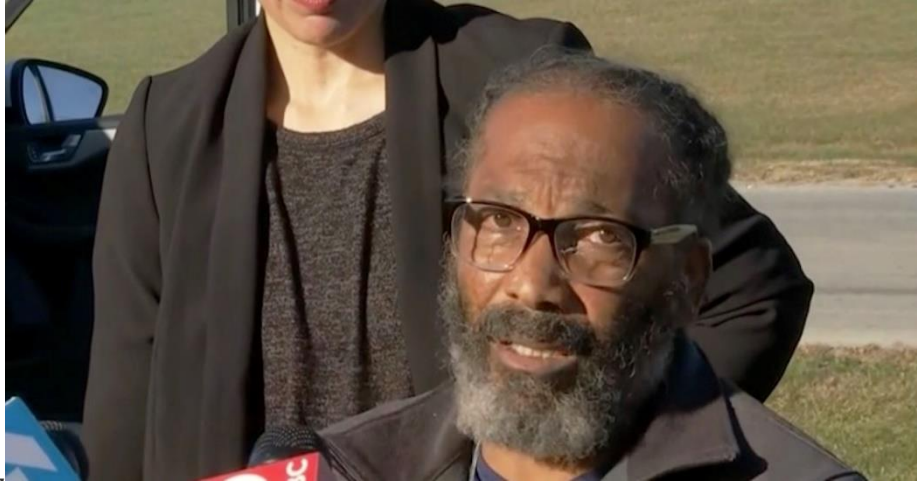


# Missouri Man Who Spent More Than 40 Years in Prison for Triple Murder He Didn't Commit Is Now Free

MARISA SARNOFF Nov 24th, 2021, 1:10 pm



*Kevin Strickland (via screengrab/CBS News)*

A Missouri man who has spent more than 40 years in prison is now a free man, after being convicted of three murders he didn't commit.

**Kevin Strickland** left the Western Missouri Correctional Center on Tuesday. He had been in prison since he was 18 years old. After his first prosecution stumbled with a hung jury, a second panel convicted him of three murders in 1979, despite no physical evidence tying him to the crime. An eyewitness later recanted her testimony.

Strickland, now 62, was convicted in the 1978 shooting deaths of **Larry Ingram**, 21, **John Walker**, 20, and, **Sherrie Black**, 22, who were killed on April 25, 1978.

The only surviving eyewitness to the crime was 20-year-old **Cynthia Douglas**, who identified Strickland from a lineup. She later walked back her testimony, and said that she was pressured into identifying Strickland, according to a *Kansas City Star* [report](#).

**Tricia Rojo Bushnell**, the director of the Midwest Innocence Project, confirmed that Strickland is back with his loved ones. Strickland has always maintained his innocence.

Retired Missouri Judge **James Welsh** ordered that Strickland be immediately released on Tuesday. Welsh ruled that Strickland's conviction should be overturned because it was not based on physical evidence but only on the since-recanted eyewitness testimony.

“I’m still in disbelief,” Strickland told reporters during a press conference shortly after leaving the jail, which was broadcast by a local Fox News station in Kansas City. “I didn’t think this day would come.”

Strickland said he learned about his exoneration and pending release while inside the prison, watching a soap opera. He said he saw his name and picture flash on the screen with the news.

“I just couldn’t believe what I was hearing,” he told reporters, adding that he soon heard other inmates yelling and banging on the walls as the news of his exoneration spread.

Strickland said he was grateful for his legal team, and for the time Welsh took in examining his decades-old case.

“I’d like to tell him thank you for listening,” Strickland said.

However, Strickland was clear that he shouldn’t have been in prison at all, and that the system that put him there is deeply flawed.

“I was an easy mark and the police took advantage of it,” Strickland said.

“It needs to be torn down and redone, from the arresting officers to the presiding judge,” Strickland later added, when asked about his thoughts on the criminal justice system. “It doesn’t work. It worked here in the long run, but it took 43 years to get here, when they knew from day one that I wasn’t the person that committed that crime. It needs to be revamped.”

Strickland, who is Black, was tried twice in 1979. His first trial ended in a hung jury, with the panel’s 11 white jurors voting to convict and the lone Black juror voting to acquit, according to a *Kansas City Star* report.

He was later convicted by an all-white jury. He was sentenced to 50 years in prison without the possibility of parole, the *Kansas City Star* report said.

A 2020 investigation by the *Kansas City Star* reported that **Vincent Bell** and **Kilm Adkins**, who had both pleaded guilty in the killings, told investigators at the time that Strickland was not with them during the shooting. A third suspect who was never charged told an investigator in 2019 that he knew Strickland was innocent, the *Kansas City Star* reported.

In May, the Jackson County Prosecutor’s Office said it had determined that Strickland is “factually innocent,” and prosecutors called for Strickland to be exonerated and immediately released. But it didn’t happen.

Strickland’s exoneration is largely due to the passage of a wide-ranging public safety law that allows prosecutors and circuit attorneys to request that a conviction

be vacated or set aside if there is information showing that the person convicted is innocent or was erroneously convicted.

Gov. **Mike Parson** (R) signed SB 53 into law earlier this year.

Without this law, however, it is unlikely Strickland would have gotten any other kind of reprieve from Missouri officials. Parson—who pardoned gun-toting married couple **Mark McCloskey** and **Patricia McCloskey**, who stared down Black Lives Matter protesters in front of their house while carrying an AR-15-style rifle and a semiautomatic pistol, respectively—refused to pardon Strickland and had remained unconvinced of his innocence.

Earlier this year, Missouri Attorney General **Eric Schmitt** said that Strickland was trying to “evade responsibility,” and in June, the Missouri Supreme Court declined to consider Strickland’s innocence petition.

However, it appears that both Parson and Schmitt have accepted Strickland’s release, even if they are not celebrating it.

“The Court has made its decision, we respect the decision,” Parson said Tuesday on Twitter. Earlier this year, I signed SB 53, which created a judicial procedure for prosecuting attorneys to use, in cases like this one, where the prosecutor believes that there was a miscarriage of justice and a wrongful conviction was entered. <https://t.co/xa5QgBtfwx>

— Governor Mike Parson (@GovParsonMO) November 23, 2021

The Court has made its decision, we respect the decision, and the Department of Corrections will proceed with Mr. Strickland’s release immediately.— Governor Mike Parson (@GovParsonMO) November 23, 2021

Schmitt’s office shared similar sentiments. “In this case, we defended the rule of law and the decision that a jury of Mr. Strickland’s peers made after hearing all of the facts in the case,” Schmitt spokesperson **Chris Nuelle** told Law&Crime in an email. “The Court has spoken, no further action will be taken in this matter.”

Despite his exoneration, Strickland will not get any financial support from the state, and is instead relying only on private donations. A GoFundMe has raised more than \$300,000.

Questions to ponder:

1. How does this happen?
2. How much does race play into these?

3. Here are some alarming statistics about wrongfully convicted: 57% Black, 8% Latino, 34% white and 2% Asian American, Native American, or self-identified “other”
4. If there was the possibility of jail-time, personal lost of job, or compensation by the parties involved; judge, p[olice, jury, etc.. This would result in a change.

If you faced a wrongful conviction, you may be interested in knowing how many people are wrongfully convicted of crimes. The answer is far too many, with the largest number of exonerations noted in instances of murder, sexual assault, and drug crimes. These innocent people live out unimaginable consequences, including tarnished reputations and shattered lives.

Even after exoneration, rebuilding a life from scratch can be a daunting task. Exonerees face financial hardship and the lingering stigma of their wrongful conviction. At USClaims, we understand the unique challenges faced by wrongly convicted individuals. As such, we offer pre-settlement funding as a financial lifeline to provide support for those fighting to clear their names and reclaim their lives.

### Wrongful Conviction Statistics

Statistics reveal some disturbing truths about how many people are wrongfully convicted in the United States, with 233 exonerations in 2022 alone.[1] Since 1989, the justice system has exonerated 3,175 people who were wrongfully convicted, collectively spending over 27,000 years behind bars for crimes they didn’t commit.[1] The average exoneree loses 16 years of their life to wrongful imprisonment, and 2022 saw record numbers of wrongful convictions.[2][3]

Specifically, how many people are wrongly imprisoned in the United States? Experts estimate that between 6% and 15.4% of people were wrongfully convicted.[4] Given that approximately 2.3 million people are currently incarcerated, between 138,000 and 354,200 of those individuals may be wrongfully imprisoned at any given time.

The impact of wrongful convictions can spread far and wide, with wrongful convictions affecting people from all walks of life and across a range of crimes, from murder and sexual assault to drug offenses and theft. The consequences are devastating, leaving deep scars on individuals, families, communities, and society. Wrongful conviction lawsuits are one of the few ways you can clear your name if you’ve been wrongfully convicted of a crime.

## **Additional reporting on this topic by the Cable News Network, CNN —**

John Jerome White was 19 years old when a Georgia judge sentenced him to life plus 40 years in prison for breaking into a 74-year-old woman's home and raping her. Exonerated after DNA testing years later, he walked free in a state that does not have laws on the books to compensate the wrongfully convicted upon their release from prison.

"I was 48 when I got out. It was rough," said White, who's now 61. "If it hadn't been for my family and the people who donated their time to help me, I just don't know. ... A lot of things were difficult, and the state of Georgia did nothing to help me."

White, who wrongly served more than two decades behind bars, was exonerated in 2007 after the Georgia Innocence Project stepped in and had the hair samples that helped lead to his conviction retested. Another man was charged for the crime.

White is one of 2,810 men and women to date who have been wrongfully convicted of crimes in the United States, according to [the National Registry of Exonerations](#). Now federal lawmakers are pushing to increase the federal statute for compensating exonerees, as the Innocence Project, along with innocence organizations across the country, advocates for a universal wrongful conviction compensation law.

Thirty-six states and Washington, DC, have laws on the books that [offer compensation](#) for exonerees, according to the Innocence Project. The federal standard to compensate those who are wrongfully convicted is a minimum of \$50,000 per year of incarceration, plus an additional amount for each year spent on death row. The current federal statute, which was [endorsed by then-President George W. Bush](#) in 2004, also serves as a model for states to create their own laws to compensate exonerees. Of the 36 states with compensation laws, [nine offer more](#) than \$50,000 per year — including Washington, DC, which offers \$200,000 per year, according to the Innocence Project.

Late last month, Democratic Rep. Maxine Waters of California introduced the [Justice for Exonerees Act](#), which would amend the federal statute to increase the compensation amount to a minimum of \$70,000 per year.

Eighteen Democrats have signed on as co-sponsors of the bill, including Reps. Hank Johnson of Georgia and Earl Blumenauer of Oregon, both states without wrongful conviction compensation laws.

"While my legislation takes an important step forward, let me be clear that no amount of money could ever be enough to make up for the time and opportunities stolen from exonerees," Waters said in a news release.

According to the National Registry of Exonerations, since 1989 there have been 291 wrongfully convicted men and women in the 14 states without such compensation laws. Of those, Pennsylvania accounts for 103 of the exonerees. Since December 2018, Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner has overseen [22 exonerations of 21 individuals](#) – one of whom was wrongfully convicted and exonerated in two separate murder cases.

Jane Roh, the communications director for Krasner's office, told CNN in a statement that "it is simply a matter of fairness that when the criminal justice system gets it wrong and a person loses their freedom due to police and/or prosecutorial misconduct, that an effort to repair the harm caused is made. Compensation for wrongfully incarcerated and convicted individuals is more than an obligation of justice; it is another tool by which the public may hold elected officials accountable."

Exonerees [in most states without compensation laws](#) must find lawmakers to introduce private bills on their behalf to get considered for compensation from the states.

White told CNN that he went through the arduous process of seeking compensation from the state of Georgia for more than two years. The first bill presented to the Georgia legislature for more than \$700,000 in compensation was rejected.

"They reconstructed the bill to \$500,000 and I have to follow all these rules. I had to make promises get a job, do community service, I can't get rearrested, and if I violate any of these conditions, they were going to revoke the money. ... It's like I'm on parole or probation even though I'm free," White told CNN.

In Oregon, Luke Wirkkala says the only recourse exonerees in the state have is to file civil lawsuits with "no guarantee you'll win."

Wirkkala, 40, was sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole in connection with the killing of a home invader before he was acquitted in April following a second trial.

"I had eight years taken from me. My life was completely destroyed. I lost my home, got divorced. I'm trying to rebuild my life. It's a huge adjustment trying to come back into the real world," Wirkkala told CNN. "Most people you meet in prison, they come from broken homes, no family ties, so when they come out, they come out with nothing."

Blumenauer told CNN that while he's glad to back the federal provision, "at the same time, we must take steps in Oregon to ensure those wronged by the state courts also have money and resources to get back on their feet." The Democrat said he plans to discuss such efforts with Oregon state lawmakers.

Rebecca Brown, the director of policy for the Innocence Project, told CNN that even some existing wrongful conviction compensation laws should be overhauled at the state level.



“These laws are written in such a narrow way that they perversely exclude innocent people from being compensated ... they are drafted in such a way that it is just incredibly difficult and many wrongfully convicted people talk about the claim process as retraumatizing because they have to reprove their innocence, yet again, to get compensated,” Brown told CNN.

In New Jersey, she said as an example, an individual can get compensated in the case of a false confession, but the state prohibits exonerees from compensation if they pleaded guilty to the crimes they were exonerated for.

“What we are often up against is, we are seeking funding for a very narrow group of people and when you are competing with other budget items, it’s incredibly difficult ... so it has to become a public outcry for it to be taken up,” Brown says.

Wirkkala echoed that call, saying, “The movement to make this universal in this country needs to happen.”