



Wrongful Convictions: How do systematic failures within the criminal justice system contribute to wrongful convictions and what reforms are most effective in preventing them?

Lexi Pittman



Purpose:

The goal of this research is to raise awareness about wrongful convictions and find solutions to prevent them. Understanding the reasons behind these cases can help improve the system and protect innocent people from being punished for crimes they did not commit.

Introduction:

The criminal justice system is designed to punish the guilty and protect the innocent. However, wrongful convictions prove that this system is far from perfect. A wrongful conviction occurs when an innocent person is found guilty of a crime they did not commit, often due to human error, faulty evidence, or intentional misconduct. The consequences are severe– lives are destroyed, trust in the injustice system is weakened, and real criminals remain free, living their best life of crime on the streets.

According to the National Registry of Exonerations, over 3,400 people in the United States have been exonerated since 1989, collectively losing more than 30,000 years behind bars for crimes they didn't commit. States are paying out hundreds of millions of dollars in compensations to exonerees, but more importantly the personal and emotional toll on those wrongfully convicted immeasurable.

Background:

Wrongful convictions can occur for several reasons, but some of the most common contributing factors are:

Eyewitness misidentification: Which accounts for nearly 69% of wrongful convictions, according to the InnocenceProject. Memory is highly unreliable, especially in the wake of a traumatic event, and witnesses often unintentionally select the wrong person due to stress, poor lineup procedures, or racial bias.

False confessions and coerced statements: Approximately 25% of DNA-based exonerations involved false confessions. Many individuals, especially young suspects or those with mental disabilities, confess under intense police pressure, hoping it will lead to leniency. Faulty forensic evidence: Techniques like bite-mark analysis, hair comparison, and even some forms of fingerprint analysis have been debunked as unreliable. In over 45% of DNA exoneration cases, forensic errors and misinterpretations contributed to the wrongful convictions.

Ineffective legal representation: Public defenders are often overloaded with cases, leading to poor legal defense. Defendants with inexperienced or underfunded lawyers are far more likely to be wrongfully convicted.

Prosecutorial and police misconduct: Some cases involve officials who hide evidence, pressure witnesses or manipulate forensic results just to secure a conviction. Over 54% of wrongful convictions involve official misconduct.

Methodology:

To make sure that I have a well-rounded analysis of my topic, I used a combination of different methods.

Case study analysis: Examined high-profile wrongful conviction cases, including those of The Central Park 5 and Anthony Ray Hinton.

Statistical research: Analyzed data from organizations like the Innocence Project, The National Registry of Exonerations, and Academic Studies.

Legal reviews: Studied court rulings, legislation, and legal defense strategies to understand systemic issues

Expert interviews: Reviewed insight from criminal justice reform advocates, defense attorneys, and exonerees.

Key Findings:

DNA evidence has changed the game of Criminal Justice System:

More than 375 DNA exonerations have occurred in the US since 1989, which shows that wrongful convictions aren't rare accidents.

False confessions happen more times than expected:

Many people assume only guilty individuals confess, but psychological research shows that intense interrogations tactics, sleep deprivation, and the fear of harsher punishments push innocent people to admit to crimes they didn't commit.

Racial and economic bias exist:

Black Americans make up 13% of the US population but represent nearly 50% of wrongful conviction.

Poor defendants, who cannot afford high-quality legal representation, are at greater risk of being convicted unfairly.

The real criminals often remain free:

In 130 DNA exoneration cases, the actual perpetrator was later identified, meaning the wrongful convictions allowed a real criminal to continue harming society.

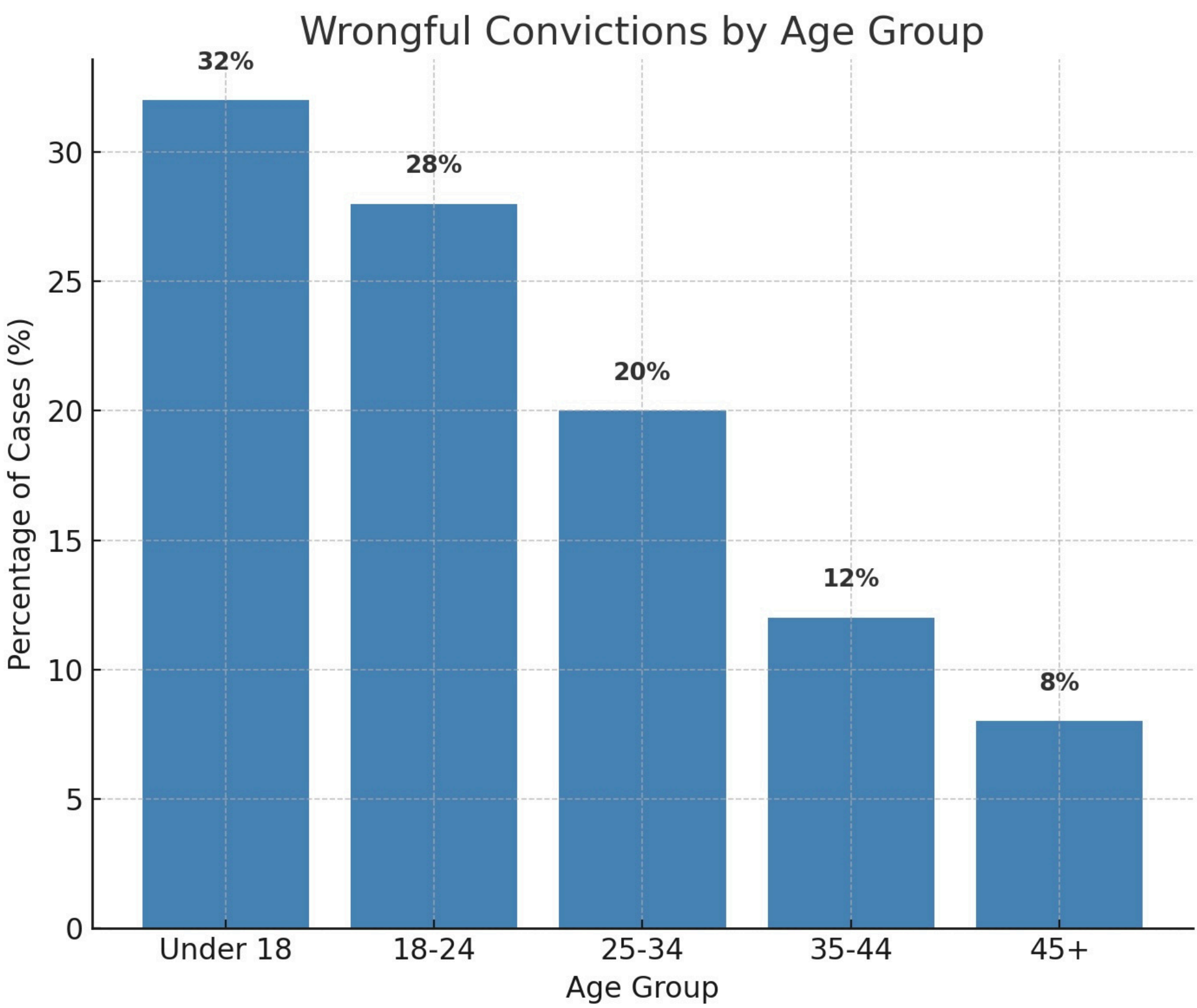
Over 3,400 people in the United States have been exonerated since 1989, collectively losing more than 30,000 years behind bars for crimes they didn't commit

Youth Vulnerability:

Individuals who are under 18 are 3 times more likely to give false confessions than adults

Financial Burden:

Since 1989, wrongful conviction lawsuits have cost taxpayers over \$2.9 Billion across the U.S.



Proposed Solutions:

The justice system must be reformed to prevent errors. Some of the most effective strategies are:

Better Eyewitness Procedures: Use double-blind lineups and record them to prevent misidentification.

Record interrogations: Ensure all interrogations are recorded to prevent false confession.

Strengthen Forensic Science: Require proven, reliable forensic methods and independent oversight when determining if someone is guilty and they length of their sentence.

Improve Legal Defense: Increase funding for public defenders to ensure fair representation

Ensure Accountability: Create independent review commission and enforce penalties for police or prosecutorial misconduct.

Conclusion:

Wrongful Convictions are a serious failure of the justice system, harming innocent people while allowing real criminals to remain free. They undermine public trust, cost taxpayers millions, and destroy lives. By improving forensics, strengthening legal representation, recording interrogations, and holding officials accountable, we can reduce these injustices and create a fairer, more reliable system. Justice should be about finding the truth – not just securing convictions.

Citations:

The Innocence Project (www.innocenceproject.org)

National Registry of Exonerations (www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration)

American Psychological Association – False Confessions Study (www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2023/04/false-confessions-justice-system)

U.S. Department of Justice– Criminal Interrogation Best Practice (<https://bja.ojp.gov/program/eyeid/overview>)

Center for Integrity in Forensic Science <https://cifsjustice.org>

Equal Justice Initiative <https://eji.org/issues/wrongful-convictions>)

National Legal Aid & Defender Association (www.nlada.org)

Pew Research Center: Public Trust and Criminal Justice (www.pewresearch.org)

