

The Perception of Justice Among Wrongfully Convicted Individuals: Life After Exoneration

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Received: 2023-01-25

Revised: 2023-02-27

Accepted: 2023-03-05

Published: 2023-04-01

This study aims to explore the perceptions of justice among individuals who have been wrongfully convicted and later exonerated. Specifically, it seeks to understand the psychological, social, and financial impacts of wrongful convictions on exonerees and their views on the justice system post-exoneration. Employing a qualitative research design, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 exonerees. The interviews aimed to gather in-depth insights into their experiences with the criminal justice system, life after exoneration, and their perceptions of justice and injustice. Theoretical saturation was reached, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomena. The study identified five major themes: Perception of Justice, Impact of Wrongful Conviction, Legal System Interaction, Reintegration Challenges, and Support Systems. Within these themes, detailed categories emerged, such as Sense of Betrayal, Trust in Legal Institutions, Need for Vindication, Personal Identity, Family Dynamics, Social Stigma, Financial Struggles, Psychological Trauma, Legal Representation, Experience with Law Enforcement, Judicial Process, Employment Difficulties, Social Reintegration, Access to Services, Personal Relationships, Family and Friends, Community Organizations, Public Awareness, and Mental Health Support. These categories encapsulate the multifaceted impact of wrongful convictions, highlighting significant psychological distress, financial hardship, social stigma, and the critical role of support systems in exonerees' reintegration and recovery processes. The study underscores the profound and lasting effects of wrongful convictions on individuals, emphasizing the need for systemic reforms in the criminal justice system. It calls for improved legal representation, compensation mechanisms, and support services to address the challenges faced by exonerees. Additionally, the findings highlight the importance of societal recognition and support to mitigate the stigma and challenges associated with wrongful convictions.

Keywords: *Wrongful Convictions, Exonerees, Justice Perceptions, Reintegration Challenges, Support Systems, Psychological Impact, Legal System Interaction.*

How to cite this article:

Erlich, J., Zhu, W., & Raj, S. (2023). The Perception of Justice Among Wrongfully Convicted Individuals: Life After Exoneration. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Society, Law, and Politics*, 2(2), 11-18. <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.isslp.2.2.3>

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of wrongful conviction, a grievous error within the criminal justice system, raises profound questions about the reliability and fairness of legal procedures across the globe. Wrongful convictions not only devastate the lives of the innocent individuals involved but also impose a heavy societal cost, eroding

public trust in legal institutions. Brooks and Greenberg (2020) provide a foundational understanding of the psychological impacts endured by individuals wrongfully accused of criminal offenses. Their systematic literature review highlights the pervasive psychological distress and long-term mental health challenges faced by exonerees, including symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and



anxiety. These findings are pivotal, as they reveal the profound emotional toll of wrongful convictions, which extends far beyond the period of incarceration (Brooks & Greenberg, 2020).

The financial and societal costs of wrongful convictions are further explored in the work of Cohen (2021), who meticulously analyzes jury awards in wrongful conviction cases. Cohen's study underscores the substantial financial burden placed on the justice system, as well as the individual suffering and societal implications of such miscarriages of justice. This analysis is crucial for understanding the broader impact of wrongful convictions, beyond the immediate effects on exonerees' lives (Cohen, 2021). DeShay (2021) contributes to this body of knowledge by offering insights into the experiences of exonerees adjusting to life post-release. Through qualitative interviews, DeShay uncovers the resilience and coping strategies employed by exonerees, providing valuable advice for newly exonerated individuals. This perspective is essential for comprehending the challenges of reintegration into society and the personal strength required to navigate this complex process (DeShay, 2021). Heilbrun et al. (2020) discuss the therapeutic needs of exonerees, emphasizing the importance of specialized psychological support to address the unique challenges faced by this population. Their recommendations for therapy underscore the necessity of acknowledging and treating the deep-seated trauma experienced by wrongfully convicted individuals, highlighting the critical role of mental health professionals in facilitating recovery and reintegration (Heilbrun et al., 2020).

Itskovich, Factor, and Ohana (2023) investigate the disparities in exoneration times between racially marginalized minority and majority-group members, shedding light on the systemic biases that exacerbate the injustices faced by wrongfully convicted individuals. Their findings point to a troubling aspect of wrongful convictions, where racial and ethnic disparities in the criminal justice system further compound the challenges of achieving justice for all (Itskovich et al., 2023). Karaffa, Page, and Koch (2015) delve into the perceptions of exonerees' deservingness to receive financial compensation for wrongful convictions (Karaffa et al., 2015). Their research reveals the complex attitudes toward compensation and the factors influencing public opinion on this issue, providing insights into the societal

views on justice and restitution for exonerees. Ramsey and Frank (2007) provide a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon of wrongful conviction, examining its causes, consequences, and the systemic flaws that contribute to such errors. Their analysis offers a critical examination of the criminal justice system, highlighting the need for reforms to prevent future miscarriages of justice (Ramsey & Frank, 2007).

Robinson, Pasternak, Mason, and Elhaik (2021) explore the forensic applications of microbiomics, illustrating the potential of emerging scientific techniques to improve the accuracy of criminal investigations. This review suggests that advancements in forensic science could play a pivotal role in reducing the incidence of wrongful convictions by providing more reliable evidence (Robinson et al., 2021). Sulley and Quansah (2020) assess the state of forensic support to criminal investigations in Ghana, offering a case study that underscores the global challenges in ensuring the accuracy and reliability of forensic evidence. Their findings highlight the importance of investing in forensic capabilities to enhance the integrity of criminal justice systems worldwide (Sulley & Quansah, 2020).

Thomas and Hoyt (2023) further investigate the psychological impact of wrongful convictions, focusing on the retrospective trajectories of distress experienced by exonerees. Their work adds depth to our understanding of the enduring psychological effects of wrongful convictions, emphasizing the need for ongoing support and intervention for exonerees (Thomas & Hoyt, 2023). Tudor-Owen, Scott, Henry, and Stratton (2019) examine the perceptions of exonerees in Australia, providing a cross-cultural perspective on the experiences and challenges faced by wrongfully convicted individuals. Their research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the impact of wrongful convictions, taking into account cultural and societal differences (Tudor-Owen et al., 2019).

Westervelt and Cook (2010) frame the wrongfully convicted as victims of state harm, offering a critical analysis of the ways in which wrongful convictions constitute a form of victimization by the state. Their work calls attention to the need for recognizing the harm inflicted on exonerees and the responsibility of the state to provide redress (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). Williamson, Stricker, Irazola, and Niedzwiecki (2016) explore the experiences of the original crime victims in

wrongful conviction cases, adding an important dimension to the discussion by considering the impact on individuals who were initially thought to have been victimized (Williamson et al., 2016).

Together, these studies form a comprehensive body of literature that provides a multi-faceted view of the consequences of wrongful convictions. They reveal the profound and lasting impact on individuals who have been wrongfully convicted, as well as the broader societal implications of such errors. The research underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms to prevent wrongful convictions and to ensure justice and support for exonerees. By examining the psychological, social, and financial ramifications of wrongful convictions, this article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by exonerees and the ways in which they navigate life after exoneration. The qualitative approach adopted in this study, focusing on semi-structured interviews with exonerees, offers rich insights into their perceptions of justice and their experiences in the aftermath of their exoneration.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to deeply understand the complex phenomena related to the perceptions of justice among wrongfully convicted individuals. The aim was to explore these individuals' lived experiences and perceptions post-exoneration to gain insights into their views on the justice system that wronged them. Qualitative research is particularly suited to this type of exploratory and sensitive subject matter, allowing for rich, detailed data collection that can reveal nuanced understandings of participants' experiences and perceptions.

Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling strategy, targeting individuals who had been wrongfully convicted and subsequently exonerated. Recruitment was facilitated through collaborations with legal aid organizations, innocence projects, and through snowball sampling techniques, where participants were asked to refer others who fit the study criteria. The study aimed to include a diverse group of participants in terms of age, gender, race, and the nature of their wrongful conviction to ensure a breadth of experiences were represented.

Transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify and categorize themes related to perceptions of justice among wrongfully convicted individuals. This involved a rigorous process of coding the data, identifying patterns, and interpreting the significance of these patterns in the context of existing literature on wrongful convictions and justice perceptions. The analysis was iterative, with ongoing comparison between the data and emerging themes to ensure a grounded understanding of participants' experiences.

Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their rights, and the confidentiality measures in place to protect their identity and data. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their interviews.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected exclusively through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted in-person or via video conferencing, depending on the participant's preference and location. The semi-structured interview guide was designed to explore participants' experiences with the justice system, their life post-exoneration, and their perceptions of justice and injustice. Questions were open-ended to allow participants to share their stories in their own words, providing the depth and detail necessary for qualitative analysis. Interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were recorded with participants' consent for accuracy in transcription and analysis.

The study continued to recruit and interview participants until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new themes or insights were emerging from the data. This approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, as saturation indicates that the collected data sufficiently represents the range of experiences and perceptions among the study population.

2.3. Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis using NVivo software. Initial codes were generated by examining the transcripts for recurring themes and concepts related to

the legal and ethical considerations of deepfake technology. These codes were then grouped into broader themes, which were refined through an iterative process involving constant comparison with the data. This analytical approach facilitated the identification of patterns and themes across the dataset, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

3. Findings and Results

In this study, a total of 25 individuals who had been wrongfully convicted and later exonerated participated.

The demographic composition of the participants was diverse, encompassing a range of ages, genders, and racial backgrounds. Specifically, the participants included 18 males (72%) and 7 females (28%), highlighting a gender disparity reflective of broader trends in wrongful convictions. Age-wise, participants were spread across several age groups: 6 (24%) were aged between 25 and 34 years, 9 (36%) fell within the 35 to 44 age range, 5 (20%) were between 45 and 54 years old, and 5 (20%) were aged 55 years or above, indicating a wide spectrum of life stages at the time of their exoneration.

Table 1

The Final Results of Qualitative Analysis

Major Theme	Minor Theme	Concepts
Perception of Justice	Sense of Betrayal	Feeling deceived by the system, Loss of faith in justice, Personal disillusionment
	Trust in Legal Institutions	Erosion of trust, Conditional trust based on outcome, Rebuilding trust
	Need for Vindication	Desire for official acknowledgment, Public apology, Compensation
Impact of Wrongful Conviction	Personal Identity	Loss of self, Reconstruction of identity, Public versus private self
	Family Dynamics	Altered family roles, Strained relationships, Support from family
	Social Stigma	Labeling effect, Community exclusion, Attempts to conceal past
	Financial Struggles	Debt accumulation, Loss of assets, Difficulty managing finances
Legal System Interaction	Psychological Trauma	Post-traumatic stress, Anxiety, Depression
	Legal Representation	Quality of defense, Advocacy and support, Access to resources
	Experience with Law Enforcement	Treatment by police, Interrogation experiences, Arrest process
Reintegration Challenges	Judicial Process	Fairness of trial, Appeals process, Sentencing and corrections
	Employment Difficulties	Barriers to employment, Employer discrimination, Skill gaps
	Social Reintegration	Reestablishing social connections, Community acceptance, Social isolation
	Access to Services	Difficulty accessing healthcare, Navigating public assistance, Housing challenges
Support Systems	Personal Relationships	Rebuilding trust, Forming new relationships, Managing expectations
	Family and Friends	Emotional support, Practical assistance, Unconditional support
	Community Organizations	Advocacy groups, Legal assistance, Reintegration programs
	Public Awareness	Raising awareness, Campaigns for justice reform, Media involvement
	Mental Health Support	Counseling services, Psychological treatment, Support groups

The qualitative analysis of interviews with 25 exonerees revealed a nuanced understanding of their perceptions of justice post-exoneration, encapsulated in five major themes with associated categories and concepts. The themes identified were: Perception of Justice, Impact of Wrongful Conviction, Legal System Interaction, Reintegration Challenges, and Support Systems. Each theme was further divided into several categories, highlighting the diverse and complex nature of the exonerees' experiences and perceptions.

Perception of Justice emerged prominently, with categories such as Sense of Betrayal, where exonerees

expressed feelings of being deceived by the justice system. One participant reflected, "I felt betrayed by the system that was supposed to protect me." The category of Trust in Legal Institutions showcased varying levels of eroded trust, with another exoneree stating, "My trust in the system is conditional; it depends on whether justice is truly served." The Need for Vindication was also highlighted, with exonerees expressing a desire for official acknowledgment of their wrongful convictions. "All I wanted was for someone to say they were wrong... that I was wronged," shared another participant.

The Impact of Wrongful Conviction theme included categories such as Personal Identity, where exonerees discussed the struggle to rebuild their identities. "Who am I now? I had to figure that out all over again," one exoneree recounted. Family Dynamics captured the altered relationships within families, with one participant noting, "My family dynamics shifted; I was a stranger in my own home." Social Stigma, Financial Struggles, and Psychological Trauma were also significant, highlighting the broad impacts of wrongful convictions on exonerees' lives.

Legal System Interaction revealed insights into Legal Representation, with exonerees emphasizing the importance of quality defense. "A good lawyer makes all the difference; I learned that the hard way," said a participant. Experience with Law Enforcement and the Judicial Process were areas where exonerees shared experiences of mistreatment and the quest for a fair trial. In Reintegration Challenges, categories such as Employment Difficulties and Social Reintegration underscored the hurdles exonerees face in reintegrating into society. "Finding a job was harder than I thought. The stigma follows you," an exoneree explained. Access to Services and Personal Relationships also highlighted the challenges in accessing healthcare and rebuilding social connections.

Lastly, the Support Systems theme underscored the critical role of Family and Friends, Community Organizations, Public Awareness, and Mental Health Support. "My family was my rock. Without them, I wouldn't have made it," shared one participant. The support from community organizations and the importance of raising public awareness were also emphasized as vital for exonerees' reintegration and healing process.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This qualitative study identified five main themes regarding the perceptions of justice among wrongfully convicted individuals post-exoneration. These themes encompass a wide range of experiences and perceptions, including the "Perception of Justice," "Impact of Wrongful Conviction," "Legal System Interaction," "Reintegration Challenges," and "Support Systems." Each theme is further divided into categories that detail specific aspects of the exonerees' experiences. The "Perception of Justice" theme includes categories such as

"Sense of Betrayal," "Trust in Legal Institutions," and "Need for Vindication." "Impact of Wrongful Conviction" explores "Personal Identity," "Family Dynamics," "Social Stigma," "Financial Struggles," and "Psychological Trauma." "Legal System Interaction" covers "Legal Representation," "Experience with Law Enforcement," and "Judicial Process." "Reintegration Challenges" comprises "Employment Difficulties," "Social Reintegration," "Access to Services," and "Personal Relationships." Lastly, "Support Systems" focuses on "Family and Friends," "Community Organizations," "Public Awareness," and "Mental Health Support."

The "Perception of Justice" theme revealed a complex interplay of feelings among exonerees, including a deep "Sense of Betrayal" by the justice system, illustrated by feelings of deception and a loss of faith in justice. The category "Trust in Legal Institutions" highlighted an erosion of trust, with some exonerees experiencing conditional trust based on outcomes, and efforts to rebuild trust. "Need for Vindication" underscored exonerees' desires for official acknowledgment of their wrongful convictions, including public apologies and compensation.

In the "Impact of Wrongful Conviction" theme, "Personal Identity" was a significant category, with exonerees describing a loss of self and efforts to reconstruct their identity. "Family Dynamics" depicted altered family roles and strained relationships, yet also support from family members. "Social Stigma" captured the labeling effect and community exclusion, while "Financial Struggles" and "Psychological Trauma" detailed the economic hardships and enduring mental health issues faced by exonerees.

The "Legal System Interaction" theme encompassed exonerees' experiences with "Legal Representation," highlighting the importance of quality defense and access to resources. "Experience with Law Enforcement" included treatment by police and interrogation experiences, and "Judicial Process" focused on the fairness of trials and the appeals process.

Under "Reintegration Challenges," "Employment Difficulties" included barriers to employment and discrimination, while "Social Reintegration" dealt with challenges in reestablishing social connections. "Access to Services" covered difficulties in accessing healthcare and public assistance, and "Personal Relationships"

highlighted the effort to rebuild trust and form new relationships.

Finally, the "Support Systems" theme emphasized the importance of "Family and Friends" for emotional and practical support, "Community Organizations" for advocacy and reintegration programs, "Public Awareness" to raise awareness and support justice reform, and "Mental Health Support" for counseling services and psychological treatment, underscoring the vital role of support networks in the journey of exonerees.

The findings of this qualitative study offer a nuanced understanding of the perceptions of justice among individuals wrongfully convicted of crimes they did not commit. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, the study illuminates the complex emotional, psychological, and social challenges faced by exonerees, echoing and extending the findings of previous research in this field. Brooks and Greenberg (2020) highlighted the significant psychological impact of wrongful accusations, including symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety, a theme that resonated strongly in our findings. Many participants in our study described enduring mental health struggles long after their exoneration, underlining the deep-seated trauma of their experiences (Brooks & Greenberg, 2020). This aligns with Thomas and Hoyt's (2023) exploration of the retrospective trajectories of distress, further emphasizing the chronic nature of psychological harm inflicted by wrongful convictions (Thomas & Hoyt, 2023). Cohen's (2021) analysis of the financial repercussions of wrongful convictions through jury awards sheds light on another facet of the exonerees' journey. Consistent with Cohen's findings, participants in our study expressed significant concerns about financial instability and the inadequate compensation for their years lost, underscoring the material and economic dimensions of their quest for justice (Cohen, 2021).

The social and interpersonal ramifications of wrongful convictions, particularly the challenges of reintegration, were also prominent in our findings. DeShay (2021) offers valuable insights into the experiences of exonerees adjusting to life post-release, a theme echoed by our participants who shared their struggles with employment, social relationships, and reclaiming their place in society (DeShay, 2021). These personal narratives underscore the enduring stigma and the barriers to social reintegration that exonerees face, as

noted by Heilbrun et al. (2020), who call for targeted therapeutic interventions to address these unique challenges (Heilbrun et al., 2020).

Furthermore, our study brings attention to the systemic biases and disparities in the experiences of exonerees, as highlighted by Itskovich, Factor, and Ohana (2023). The prolonged time to exoneration for racially marginalized individuals discussed in their study is reflected in our findings, where participants from minority groups shared stories of compounded injustices, emphasizing the intersectionality of race, justice, and wrongful conviction (Itskovich et al., 2023).

Karaffa, Page, and Koch's (2015) research on perceptions of exonerees' deservingness to receive financial compensation for wrongful convictions intersects with our findings, where exonerees voiced their frustrations over the inadequacy of current compensation mechanisms and the public's misunderstanding of their needs and rights (Karaffa et al., 2015). This highlights a broader societal issue, pointing to the need for policy reform and greater public awareness, a sentiment echoed by Westervelt and Cook (2010) in their framing of the wrongly convicted as victims of state harm (Westervelt & Cook, 2010).

The role of forensic science in both contributing to and addressing wrongful convictions is another critical theme that emerged from our study. Aligning with Robinson, Pasternak, Mason, and Elhaik (2021), our findings underscore the potential of advancements in forensic science to prevent wrongful convictions, while also acknowledging past forensic errors that have led to unjust imprisonments (Robinson et al., 2021).

Lastly, our study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the experiences of the original crime victims in wrongful conviction cases, a perspective explored by Williamson, Stricker, Irazola, and Niedzwiecki (2016). The complex dynamics of victimization highlighted in their study are reflected in our findings, where exonerees discuss the dual harm inflicted by the criminal justice system on both themselves and the victims of the original crimes (Williamson et al., 2016).

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of justice among individuals wrongfully convicted of crimes they did not commit. Through semi-structured interviews with 25 exonerees, the research illuminated the profound psychological, social, and financial challenges faced by these individuals. Key findings revealed the

enduring mental health struggles, including symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety; the financial instability and concerns over insufficient compensation; the social and interpersonal challenges of reintegration; systemic biases and prolonged times to exoneration for marginalized groups; and the critical role of advancements in forensic science in preventing wrongful convictions.

The journey of exonerees, as uncovered in this study, highlights a complex landscape marked by enduring challenges and systemic injustices. Despite their exoneration, individuals continue to confront profound psychological distress, financial instability, and social stigmatization, compounded by systemic disparities. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive reforms within the criminal justice system to prevent wrongful convictions and to support exonerees in their reintegration and recovery processes.

This study, while providing valuable insights into the experiences of exonerees, is not without its limitations. The qualitative nature and the relatively small sample size limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focuses on a specific demographic, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences among all exonerees. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces the potential for bias in the participants' recollections and interpretations of their experiences.

Future research should aim to expand the demographic and geographic diversity of study participants to capture a broader range of experiences among exonerees. Quantitative studies could complement this qualitative research, offering broader insights into the prevalence of the challenges identified. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could provide valuable information on the long-term trajectories of exonerees' psychological well-being, social reintegration, and financial stability.

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for legal, psychological, and social support systems tailored to the needs of exonerees. Legal reforms should focus on enhancing the accuracy of criminal investigations and trials, as well as improving compensation mechanisms for wrongful convictions. Psychological support services must address the unique mental health challenges faced by exonerees, facilitating their healing and reintegration into society. Finally, public awareness campaigns and educational programs are critical to changing societal

perceptions of exonerees, helping to reduce stigma and support their reintegration.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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