

THE EXONERATION PROJECT

NEWSLETTER

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To celebrate the new year and the newfound freedom of some of EP's exonerees, we sat down with EP clients Jimmy Soto, Frankie Benitez, and Darien Harris to chat about what they've been up to and how they've been doing since coming home, as well as their future plans and goals. We are so happy that all three are getting to spend time with friends and family, and we look forward to supporting them in their future endeavors. You can read our conversations further in this issue:



In 2023, we
exonerated
16 people ...

2023 RECAP

...who spent a combined
total of 250+ years
wrongfully imprisoned



February 9th, 2023

John Martinez Exonerated.
Wrongfully imprisoned for
24 years



April 13th, 2023

Richard Kwil Exonerated.
Wrongfully imprisoned for
24 years



June 26th, 2023

Joseph Janke Exonerated.
Wrongfully imprisoned for
10 years



September 14th, 2023

Leonard Logan Exonerated.
Wrongfully imprisoned for
19 years



September 26th, 2023

Francisco Benitez Exonerated.
Wrongfully imprisoned for
34 years



December 4th, 2023

Sean Farrow Exonerated.
Wrongfully imprisoned for 4 months



December 4th, 2023

Jonathan Long Exonerated.
Wrongfully imprisoned for 2 years



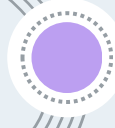
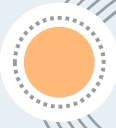
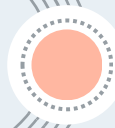
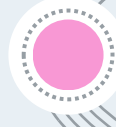
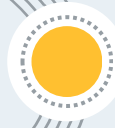
December 12th, 2023

Joseph Roberts Exonerated.
Wrongfully imprisoned for 2.5 years



December 19th, 2023

Darien Harris Exonerated.
Wrongfully imprisoned for
12 years



October 11th, 2023

Patrick Taylor Exonerated.
Wrongfully imprisoned for
16 years



December 4th, 2023

Dwayne Pennant Exonerated.
Wrongfully imprisoned for 2
years



December 4th, 2023

Jaquan Harris Exonerated
after already serving his
sentence.




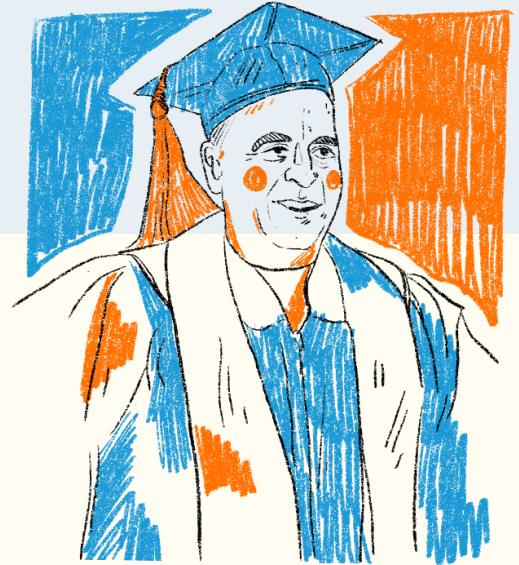
December 14th, 2023

Jimmy Soto Exonerated.
Wrongfully imprisoned for
42 years





JIMMY SOTO INTERVIEW



Jimmy Soto, the longest wrongfully convicted individual in Illinois to be exonerated, is a native of the South Side. His formative years were in the Pullman area on 98th Street, where his love for sports took root amidst the vibrant neighborhood teams.

Soto was exonerated and released following 42 years of wrongful incarceration on December 14, 2023. Reflecting on his re-entry journey, Soto encountered unexpected challenges in adjusting to cultural shifts. He observed a decline in outdoor community activity, especially among children, amid pandemic-era restrictions and technological advancements. He notes that among the most difficult challenges to overcome is shedding the ingrained mentality cultivated during his time in prison. Adjusting after 42 years is no easy feat; the sudden change prompted him to seek therapy to navigate this transition.

Upon his release, Soto's first indulgence was a ribeye steak and sea bass at the Rosebud in the Loop. The next morning, finding solace and tranquility during sunrise at the lakeshore, he encountered women who recognized him from the news. "For me," he says, "It was really nice to see people genuinely welcome me home."

While incarcerated, he obtained a degree in sociology, law, and creative writing through the Northwestern Prison Education Program. He aspires to become a lawyer and help others who have been wrongfully convicted. Looking ahead, Soto eagerly anticipates upcoming travels, including speaking engagements at conferences in New Orleans and New York and a panel discussion at Amherst College in April. He hopes to also pursue international travel, specifically in Italy and Mexico.

Soto emphasizes the importance of facilitating successful reintegration for all, and appreciated the opportunity he had to pursue a bachelor's degree. "I would tell everybody to get involved in higher education," he says. "It can be transformative, but it can also help you achieve your dreams." In his eyes, every individual deserves the opportunity to pursue their passion.



DARIEN HARRIS INTERVIEW



On December 20, 2023, Darien Harris was released from prison after serving over 12 years for a conviction based almost entirely on the testimony of a legally blind witness. He describes feeling “euphoric” after his exoneration.

Since being released, Harris has experienced both “ups” and “downs.” On the one hand, for example, he is grateful that he was able to come home and be with his wife and family and enjoy Christmas with them. On the other hand, Harris describes he has been faced with financial difficulties due to the lack of financial support exonerates receive after their release.

Looking to the future, Harris has a number of goals he would like to achieve. He’d like to go to law school and practice criminal law. He is also interested in founding schools in the Chicago area. He grew up attending Chicago Public Schools as well as schools in the suburbs, and he noticed that the suburban schools teach more practical skills that allow one to build a good life, such as how to lead a team, how to manage money, how to get a job, etc. Harris wants to address that disparity. He also believes students shouldn’t need to go to college to get a good job, and he wants to prepare students to get good jobs after they graduate from high school. Harris is also interested in eventually starting a non-profit.

One thing that Mr. Harris would like to share with EP’s supporters is what it is like to be in prison. He says prisoners are treated like animals, often being arbitrarily punished or mistreated by police and guards. He doesn’t think people really understand how bad prison conditions are.

Fortunately, throughout his exoneration and re-entry process, Harris has found support in his friends and family. He credits them for helping him get through the experience. When asked what advice he has for other people facing a wrongful conviction, Harris says, “Never give up hope. You have to just keep fighting and believe in your case.”





FRANCISCO BENITEZ INTERVIEW

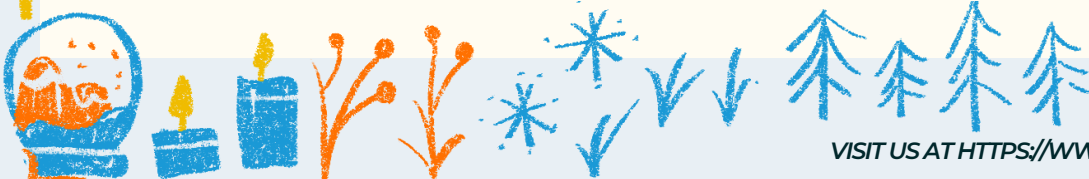
Francisco ("Frankie") Benitez was wrongfully convicted of a double murder at the age of 18 and spent the next 34 years in prison. He was exonerated last summer on August 29, 2023.

Reflecting on his re-entry journey, Benitez admits that there are several things that are taking some getting used to. For example, "In prison, you constantly have to watch your back," Benitez says, whereas this is not so much the case anymore. Another thing that has struck him is the sheer number of choices he has to make daily, even when doing something as "simple" as shopping at the grocery store. "There's like a thousand types of Bread!" Benitez explains, "There's such a wide variety of stuff that's available compared to what's available in the commissary."

For Benitez, the best part about being home has been having the chance to spend time with his family and just "live life." Earlier this month, Benitez traveled to Las Vegas for the first time with his girlfriend and family to celebrate his niece's 21st birthday. He also looks forward to this coming June, when he will be traveling to Walt Disney World in Florida to celebrate his mother's 70th birthday.


While Benitez is grateful that he has been exonerated, he emphasized that the win feels bittersweet. "Sometimes you have to listen when someone says: 'Hey I'm innocent. I need help,'" Benitez explains. "It took 34 years for me to come home, it shouldn't have taken that long." When it comes to himself and other exonerees, he hopes that people recognize that their lives were taken from them, and that "the justice system really isn't just."

When asked what he wants others to know about his experience in prison, Benitez replied, "Being incarcerated you get treated like an animal, and that kind of carries on when you get out." He adds, "People think prison changes you because you're gone for so long, and that's not true... I fought hard to make sure that prison didn't change who I was." Instead, Benitez requests: "don't judge us based on where we've been, because for the most part we're not the people they say we are."






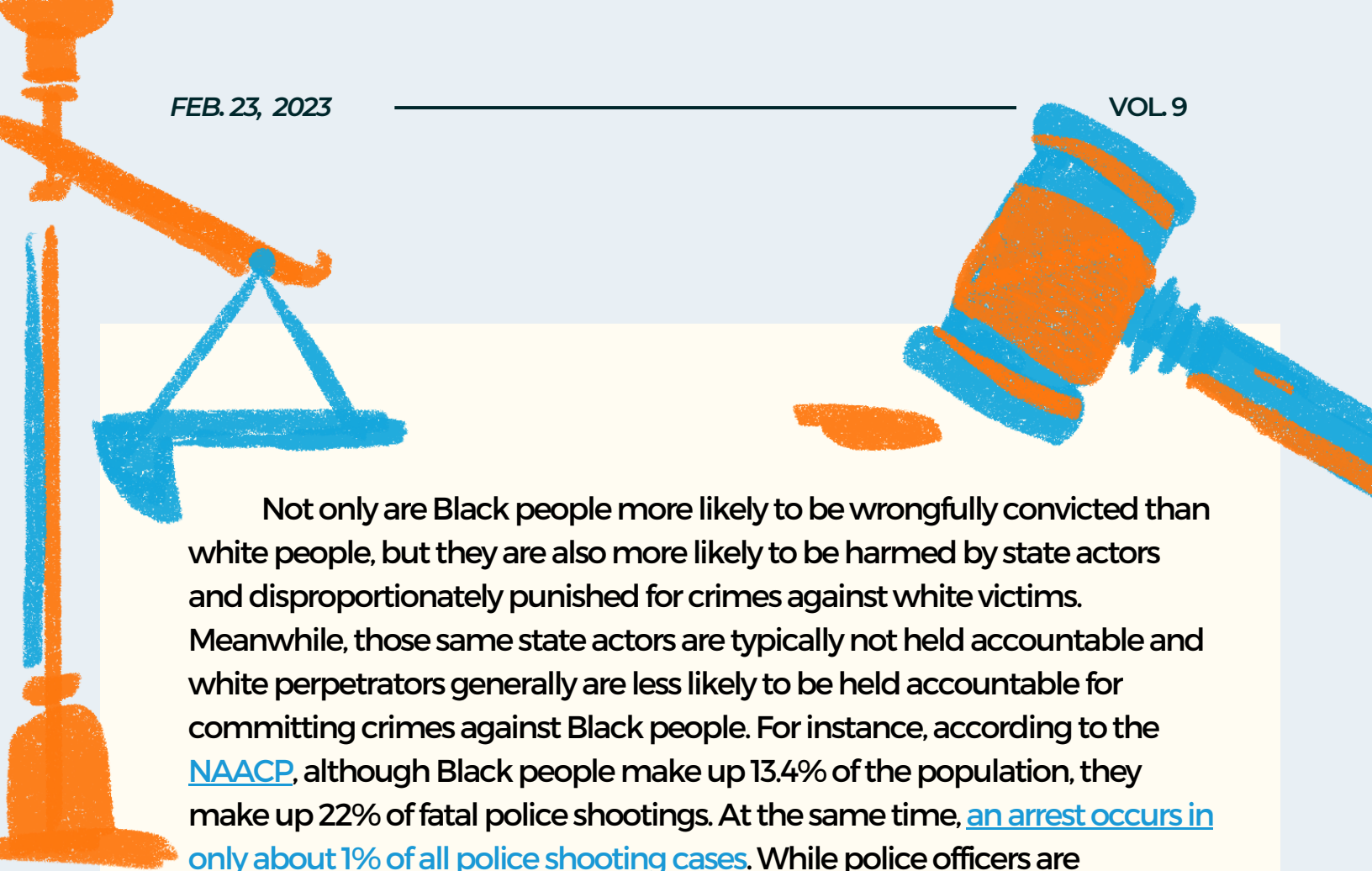
BLACK HISTORY MONTH FEATURE: WRONGFUL CONVICTIONS V. WRONGFUL AQUITTALS



In honor of Black History Month, EP would like to highlight a few key inconsistencies within the criminal legal system. Black people make up the majority of those who are wrongfully convicted, while police officers and white people charged with murder and severe misconduct against Black victims are more likely to be acquitted. In other words, Black people in our criminal justice system are more likely than white people to be victims of misconduct and abuse and less likely to get justice for that abuse, while at the same time more likely to be wrongfully convicted or murdered by law enforcement than their white counterparts.

According to a recent report by the National Registry of Exonerations, Black people accounted for more than half of the exonerations listed in the National Registry of Exonerations, making innocent Black Americans seven times more likely than white Americans to be falsely convicted of serious crimes. Such racial disparity is present, in varying degrees, for all major crime categories except white collar crime. For example, Black people who are convicted of murder are about 80% more likely to be innocent than other people convicted of murder. Moreover, the convictions that led to murder exonerations with Black defendants were almost 50% more likely to include misconduct by police officers than those with white defendants. As more people are exonerated, such disparities are expected to grow.



An illustration featuring a scale of justice on the left and a gavel on the right, both rendered in orange and blue. The scale has a blue pan hanging from an orange beam. The gavel is blue with an orange head. The background is a light blue gradient with abstract orange and blue brushstrokes at the bottom.

Not only are Black people more likely to be wrongfully convicted than white people, but they are also more likely to be harmed by state actors and disproportionately punished for crimes against white victims. Meanwhile, those same state actors are typically not held accountable and white perpetrators generally are less likely to be held accountable for committing crimes against Black people. For instance, according to the [NAACP](#), although Black people make up 13.4% of the population, they make up 22% of fatal police shootings. At the same time, [an arrest occurs in only about 1% of all police shooting cases](#). While police officers are infrequently held accountable for their crimes, [according to a recent study by the Death Penalty Information Center](#) and the [ACLU](#), Black people are far more likely to be sentenced to death for a crime committed against a white person than white people are for crimes committed against a Black person.

In sum, it is important to remember this Black History Month that Black people are dually wronged by the criminal legal system: they are more likely to be victims of police brutality and misconduct and more likely to be wrongfully convicted, yet they are also less likely to get justice when they themselves are the victims of crimes.

JUSTICE-IMPACTED COMMUNITY SPACE

INVITE

We are excited to invite all EP clients to our first monthly Justice-Impacted Community Space that we will host at our office on Tuesday, February 27 at 6pm. Thommy, Bhavana, and Reyna are excited to kick-off a monthly space for us all to gather with food, fun, games, and conversation.

Our goal is for this event to provide you with an opportunity to regularly gather with community and like-minded friends. We hope to see you there. Let us know if you have any questions!

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27TH @ 6PM

**FEATURING FOOD, FUN AND GAMES!
CAN'T WAIT TO SEE YOU THERE**

