

## Wrongfully Convicted Suffer Long-Term Psychological Effects

By Theresa Torricellas,  
JD Correspondent

According to an innovative study of post-release personality changes in the wrongfully convicted by Dr. Adrian Grounds, forensic psychiatrist and lecturer at the University of Cambridge, the long term psychological effects of wrongful convictions and imprisonment include the kind of trauma experienced by victims of war crimes, with a high incidence of enduring personality changes.

While concluding the symptoms were different than those of post-traumatic stress disorder, "I think the closest analogy is to Vietnam vets coming home," Grounds said.

After examining 17 cases of the wrongly convicted, all but two convicted of murder, Grounds research showed there were changes to the wrongly convicted's personality frequently noticed by family members. These were described as chronically moody, irritable, bitter, suspicious of other people and uncommunicative to the point of being unable to carry on a conversation. The British, Irish and Canadian subjects of the study, all men, agreed to speak with Grounds on condition of anonymity.

Grounds research found the wrongly convicted experience a sense of being "frozen in time" as a result of significant personal losses in prison, including their most productive years and the death of loved ones. Some felt guilty for missing a whole generation of family life, while many reported feeling the same age they were when entering prison. Even though the subjects of the

study were not generally persons who suffered from psychiatric disorders in the past, many displayed symptoms of anxiety, panic disorders and paranoia.

During an interview with the *Toronto Star*, Grounds noted that some of the marriages which held together during years of imprisonment broke up after the men's release. Prison visits had centered on offering support, with both spouses focused on winning the husband's release. While in prison, the family was shielded from how much the wrongly convicted had changed, while at home, wives warned their children not to burden their father with their problems.

Grounds found the wrongly convicted were frequently unprepared for their release and lacked assistance to help them reintegrate, unlike longterm prisoners carefully groomed for release. While financial compensation was an important concern for the men, most were more interested in a public declaration of their innocence and an apology from the State. Some had well grounded fears for their own safety, and a sense that others, especially police, did not accept their innocence and were whispering behind their back,

While "not everyone is terribly affected and disabled" said Grounds, the majority had "very significant difficulties. Nobody was completely free of problems. But some were doing better than others." Grounds concluded that victims of a wrongful conviction should be offered long-term clinical support from doctors knowledgeable of the effects of trauma and imprisonment. Also, they could benefit from peer counseling from other wrongfully convicted persons, since "those who have been through it themselves are the best teachers and advisors."

Source: Once wrongly convicted, men are forever changed, Tracey Tyler (Legal Affairs Reporter), *Toronto Star*, November 15, 2002.



## Stop Prisoner Rape seeks Stories from Inside

When Chance Martin walked into a party in an Indiana hotel room he was a high-school student expecting only to have a good time with his girlfriend. He had no idea that he would soon be on his way to jail because another guest dropped drugs in the lobby. Or that while jailed he would be brutally raped.

Unfortunately, his experience is far from unusual. Often unfamiliar with jail or prison life, nonviolent drug offenders are among

those at highest risk for prisoner rape.

Stop Prisoner Rape (SPR), a national human rights organization dedicated to eliminating sexual violence against men, women, and youth behind bars, is working on a project that will feature voices rarely heard in the debate over state and federal drug policy – those of the prisoners themselves.

*Stories from Inside* will give first-hand accounts of nonviolent drug offenders who have endured sexual abuse in custody. By telling their stories, prisoner rape survivors will challenge stereotypes about prisoner rape and the public's perception that drug offenders "get what they deserve" while incarcerated.

## Tough "To Pick Up The Pieces" After 25 Years of Wrongful Imprisonment

In 1978, 15-year-old Paul Blackburn's protestations of innocence of murdering a 9-year-old boy in Warrington, Cheshire, England were drowned out by what police claimed was his written confession. In 2003, after 25 years of imprisonment, Blackburn was released on bond, and in May 2005 his conviction was quashed by the U.K.'S Court of Appeals based on state of the art linguistic evidence that the police had actually dictated his alleged confession. After two years of freedom, Blackburn told reporters, "I haven't been able to pick up the pieces and I don't know if I ever will."

Source: Man Wrongly Accused of Murder Hits Out at Police, Cathy Gordon, *The Scotsman*, Glasgow, Scotland, May 26, 2005.



## Man Left With PTS After 11 Years Wrongful Imprisonment

Mike O'Brien was one of three defendants known in England as the 'Cardiff Newsagent Three.' The men were convicted in 1988 of the October 1987 robbery and murder of newsagent Phillip Saunders in Cardiff, Wales. The three men were exonerated of the murder in 1999 and released after 11 years of wrongful imprisonment.

Six years after his release from prison, O'Brien continues to experience after-effects from his ordeal. He has been diagnosed as suffering from "irreversible, persistent and disabling post-traumatic stress syndrome."

Source: The wrongly imprisoned are still paying for crimes they didn't commit, Comment, *The Observer* (London UK), July 31, 2004.



By telling their stories, survivors will help the public to see the human cost of the war on drugs – people like Chance Martin, once a college-bound teenager, whose life has been punctuated by mental institutions, drug abuse, and homelessness because of the abuse he endured behind bars.

For more information about participating in *Stories from Inside*, contact: Andrea Cavanaugh, SPR 3325 Wilshire Blvd. Ste 340 Los Angeles CA 90010 Or email, [acavanaugh@spr.org](mailto:acavanaugh@spr.org) Website, <http://spr.org>

