

Federal Court Is The Death Zone For Innocent State Prisoners

Federal court is the place where an innocent state prisoner goes as a last resort when the highest court in their state has denied justice. It is common to hear people assert a prisoner will finally get justice when they gets out of what is viewed as a state court system rigged to protect shady convictions and the wrongdoing by prosecutors and police. Federal court is envisioned as nirvana populated with judges dedicated to seeking the truth. Unfortunately, reality is that the overwhelming majority of state prisoners have the last vestige of their belief in justice crushed in federal court.

Six state prisoners were exonerated in 2016 after having their federal habeas corpus petition granted. Six out of the thousands of federal habeas petitions filed each year by state prisoners in the United States, plus Puerto Rico, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. [Those six people were:](#)

- Joel Albert Alcox, convicted of murder and robbery and served 26 years in custody.
- Jaime Caetano, convicted of possessing a dangerous weapon (stun gun) and who served several days in jail.
- Teshome Campbell, convicted of first-degree murder and served 18 years in custody.
- Jimmie Gardner, convicted of rape and assault and served 27 years in custody.
- William Haughey, convicted of arson and served 8 years in custody.
- Jules Letemps, convicted of sexual assault and kidnapping and served 27 years in custody.

The exoneration in 2016 of those six wasn't an anomaly. It was actually more than the annual average of less than five from 2002 to 2016, when there were a total of 64 exonerations of a state prisoner following the grant of their federal habeas corpus. For each year from 2002 to 2016 the number of [exonerations were:](#)

2016 = 6
 2015 = 7
 2014 = 3
 2013 = 4
 2012 = 2
 2011 = 4
 2010 = 4
 2009 = 6
 2008 = 4
 2007 = 7
 2006 = 3



Federal Court House with 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here' inscribed above entrance.

2005 = 2
 2004 = 3
 2003 = 5
 2002 = 4
 Total = 64

The 64 state prisoner exonerations in the fifteen years from 2002 to 2016 was *less than one* for each of the 94 federal court districts. Those 64 exonerations were of state prisoners in only 20 states, plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico:

Arizona = 1
 California = 12
 Connecticut = 1
 District of Columbia = 2
 Florida = 2
 Illinois = 6
 Louisiana = 1
 Massachusetts = 4
 Nevada = 3
 New Jersey = 1
 New York = 12
 North Carolina = 2
 Ohio = 6
 Oklahoma = 2
 Oregon = 1
 Pennsylvania = 1
 Puerto Rico = 1
 Texas = 1
 Virginia = 1
 Washington = 1
 West Virginia = 1
 Wisconsin = 2

More than half — 36 — came from federal courts in four states: California (12); Illinois (6); Ohio (6); and, New York (12). *So in the fifteen years from 2002 to 2016 there wasn't a single state prisoner exonerated by a federal court in thirty states!*

The rarity of an exoneration as the result of action by a federal court is not only shown by how few occur, but by the low number of successful petitions compared with the number of habeas petitions filed. From 2002 to 2016 there were 51,010 federal habeas petitions filed by state prisoners seeking to overturn their conviction(s). That means the overall the success rate was one out of 797, or 00.1255%. That is very long odds at best.

However, federal courts treat a case in which the death penalty was imposed more favorably than a non-death penalty case. That is reflected in the significant difference in the exoneration rate between the two types of cases.

There were 56 exonerations out of the 50,884 state prisoner non-death penalty federal habeas petitions filed. So 1 out of 909 petitions was successful, a rate of 0.11%.

There were 126 habeas petitions filed in a death penalty case, and 8 exonerations. So 1 out of 15.75 petitions was successful, a rate of 6.3%.

Hovering over every failed federal habeas corpus petition is the gleeful ghost of deceased U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist. He was a champion of the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) enacted in 1996. Rehnquist was a passionate proponent of limiting the ability of state prisoners to successfully raise post-conviction constitutional claims in federal court. The AEDPA codified some of the judicial rules in effect during his reign as chief justice.

The AEDPA established procedural requirements and review standards so onerous that few state prisoners can meet them, regardless of the merits of their case -- or their factual innocence. Consequently, the AEDPA is working exactly as Rehnquist intended to make federal court the place where state prisoners go to have their hopes die.

[Click here to go to the United States Court webpage](#) that has statistical tables for the filing of federal habeas petitions.

The information about the exonerated individuals and the number of exonerations are from the [Innocents Database](#).

Selected previous Justice Denied articles about the AEDPA:

[Study Shows 300% Fewer Federal Habeas Petitions](#) Granted After 1996 AEDPA Was Enacted, Justice Denied, August 21 2007

[U.S. Supreme Court Sends Message To Federal Courts](#) That When In Doubt Deny A State Prisoner's Habeas Petition, March 23, 2011

[Federal Appeals Court Judge Declares Habeas Corpus](#) Is "Dead In This Country", Justice Denied, June 7, 2011

Sources:

Statistical Tables for the Federal Judiciary, United States Court, uscourts.gov
Innocents Database, www.forejustice.org/exonerations.htm

