The truth is in the DNA: we’re punishing, sometimes even executing, the wrong people. Here’s what we can learn from cases in which DNA tests have saved lives.

**CHRISTOPHER OCHOA SPENT 12 YEARS IN PRISON** for a rape and murder he did not commit. As co-directors of the University of Wisconsin Law School’s Innocence Project, we were fortunate to be part of the team of lawyers and law students who helped to secure his freedom. His release was powerfully rewarding and moving to those of us involved.

More than that, his release provided poignant reminders of the value of freedom and lessons about our system and our society. His case is important not only because finally we got it right, but also because we had it so wrong.

His case, like many cases of wrongful conviction, is also a story about race in America. As a young 22-year-old Mexican American man in 1988, with absolutely no criminal record, Chris was picked up by police for questioning following the rape and murder of Nancy DePriest, a 20-year-old Pizza Hut manager who was attacked as she prepared to open the restaurant. There were no witnesses to the crime and few leads for police to pursue. But several weeks later, Chris and his friend, Richard Danziger, happened to go to the restau-
innocence project

Chris was subjected to prolonged, intensive interrogation by police officers bent on obtaining a confession at any cost.

heard of the men who had been convicted of the crime. Unfortunately, the letters generated little interest from Texas authorities.

In 1999 Chris wrote to the Wisconsin Innocence Project at the University of Wisconsin Law School, asking us and our law students to help him prove his innocence. The law students investigated, discovered that the physical evidence from the case still existed, and requested DNA tests. Finally, late in 2000, new DNA tests and other corroborating evidence proved beyond any doubt that both Chris and Richard had nothing to do with the crime, and that Marino alone was responsible.

On January 16, 2001, the district attorney’s office and the defense filed a joint application to set aside Chris’s conviction and free him on the ground that he is innocent. He walked out of court that day into the arms of his sobbing mother and into a world he hadn’t seen firsthand in more than a decade. Richard’s release was delayed until March because while in prison he was severely beaten by another inmate and suffered brain damage. He could not be released until adequate arrangements could be made for his care.

When Chris walked out of that courtroom a free man, not one but two mothers shed bittersweet tears. The other mother was Jeanette Popp, the mother of the victim. The wrongful conviction meant that she had to revisit the pain of losing her daughter. And she came to realize that police had perpetrated a lie against her for 12 years, including making her believe that her daughter had suffered in ways she had not. The confession the police concocted wrongly included unnecessary brutality, including false claims that her daughter had been repeatedly sodomized and had been forced to beg for her life before she was killed.

Jeanette Popp rose above her own experience. Everything was destroyed before it could be DNA tested. If Marino’s DNA had not been preserved in a police locker for all those years? What if Marino had murdered but not raped Nancy, thereby leaving behind no other evidence? How many other innocent people have been able to prove their innocence because no biological evidence was left at the crime scene by the perpetrator, or if it was, it was destroyed before it could be DNA tested? What can we learn from this and the other cases?

We can learn much. DNA has opened a window to our criminal justice system. Because of new DNA tests, we know that we convict and—since some of the exonered have been on death row—almost certainly execute innocent men and women. Through this open window we can study the causes of the system’s failures. For the first time in the history of the criminal justice system, we have a body of cases in which we know the system malfunctioned. These cases can offer insights into our errors and suggest reforms.

But DNA is no panacea, and this window will not always remain open. Unfortunately, DNA evidence exists in
only a small minority of criminal cases; the run-of-the-mill robbery, shooting, or burglary involves no exchange of genetic material. Moreover, where biological evidence exists, DNA is increasingly tested early in the investigative stage, which means that people like Chris and Richard can quickly be eliminated as suspects. The body of wrongful convictions exposed through postconviction testing is destined to decline.

We should not become complacent in believing that, now that we have DNA, we have fixed the system. More DNA testing does not mean we will stop convicting the innocent. It just means we will often prevent mistakes in the few cases that have DNA evidence. Instead of becoming complacent, we must analyze the exonerations and isolate the factors that lead to the convictions of innocent people. Unfortunately, many of the contributing factors remain firmly entrenched in the system and will continue to cause errors that DNA can’t correct.

The DNA cases highlight a number of frequent causes of wrongful convictions and necessary reforms. They confirm that the single most common cause of wrongful convictions is mistaken eyewitness identifications. The criminal justice system relies too heavily on eyewitness identifications obtained without sufficient safeguards, often under highly suggestive circumstances. Too often, the criminal justice system ignores what a growing body of scientific literature teaches about the need and methods for obtaining greater protections against tainted and unreliable identifications.

Cases like Chris Ochoa’s also demonstrate that people do indeed confess to crimes they did not commit, and that we should not view confessions as indisputable proof of guilt. They also point to remedies, such as the simple solution of requiring police to videotape their interrogations, so as to prevent or at least expose the types of coercive tactics that can produce false confessions.

The DNA cases also point to the need to guard against fraudulent or sloppy forensic science and police and prosecutorial misconduct, as well as the need to limit the reliance on always-suspect testimony of jailhouse informants (or “snitches”), who offer their testimony in return for favorable consideration in their own cases. And they highlight the importance of competent defense counsel and underscore the importance of improving the quality of defense representation for the indigent.

**THE OVERLAY OF RACE**

The DNA exonerations also give us new insights about the role of race. They show that race often works in combination with or exacerbates each of these other factors that lead to wrongful convictions.

It is, of course, no great revelation that race matters in the criminal justice system. We have long known that minorities in prison far outnumber their proportion of the society at large. Although African Americans make up about 13 percent of the population nationwide, they constitute half the prison population. About 9 percent of the adult African American population is currently incarcerated or under supervision. The lifetime chance of imprisonment for African American males is greater than one in four.

In Wisconsin the numbers are even starker. Although African Americans make up less than 6 percent of the state population, they constitute 51 percent of new prison admissions. According to UW-Madison sociology professor Pamela Oliver, African Americans in the United States are imprisoned at 6.6 times the rate of whites, and Wisconsin has the second largest racial disparity of this kind in the nation.

In capital cases, the record is as unbalanced. Until recently, in many states rape was a capital offense. Rarely was the death penalty invoked against white men; when invoked, it was almost always against black men convicted of raping white women. In 1987, lawyers for black defendants collected sophisticated racial data in Georgia and presented it to the Supreme Court to establish that the death penalty was imposed in a racially discriminatory manner. The data showed that those who killed white victims were 4.3 times more likely to get the death penalty than those who killed black victims. The data also showed that blacks who kill whites were sentenced to death at nearly 22 times the rate of blacks who kill blacks, and more than seven times the rate of whites who kill blacks.

In McCleskey v. Kemp in 1987, the Supreme Court accepted this and other data of racial disparity. But by a 5-4 vote, the Court held that this was insufficient evidence upon which to conclude that the Constitution requires the cessation of executions. In large part, the Court concluded that a certain amount of disparity is simply inevitable in the administration of criminal justice.
The officer told Chris that the “white guys always walk, and the Hispanics always get the needle.” He urged Chris to confess quickly so that he could get the deal instead this time.

New York Police Department statistics show that in 1998, of 175,000 reported stop-and-frisk encounters, 84 percent of those stopped were African Americans or Hispanics. Yet such encounters produced grounds for an arrest in only one in 16 of the cases involving an African American, and one in 14 involving Hispanics, but one in 10 of the cases in which whites were stopped. Illinois State Police statistics show that, while Hispanics make up 8 percent of the Illinois population, they comprise 30 percent of the individuals stopped by police in drug interdiction attempts. In Philadelphia during one week, police made 500 stops and recorded racial information in 262 of the cases. Of those, 79 percent were African American. In Volusia County, Florida, police produced 148 hours of videotape of more than 1,000 traffic stops. The videos showed that 5 percent of the drivers on the highway were dark-skinned. But 70 percent of those stopped were African American or Hispanic, and 80 percent of the cars searched were driven by African Americans or Hispanics. Only nine of the 1,000-plus stops resulted in a ticket. Racial profiling is both a product of racial bias in the system and a cause of the bias.

The wrongful conviction cases give us more confirming evidence of these biases. More than half (56 percent) of those who were wrongly convicted and then exonerated by DNA are African American, 12 percent are Hispanic, and 32 percent are white. Barry Scheck, Peter Neufeld, and Jim Dwyer, in their book Actual Innocence, report that in their study of DNA exonerations they found that 40 percent of the sexual assaults or murders involved black men and white victims. The rate at which such crimes actually take place is much lower, they note: “The Justice Department reports that 15 percent of sex murders involve black assailants and white victims.”
Despite the intransigence of such problems, the innocence cases also give cause for hope. The wrongful conviction cases have created a climate of reflection and a new measure of apparent receptiveness to reforms. They have identified measures that can reduce the risks of errors. And because race so often works in combination with other factors, such as coercive police interrogation tactics or faulty eyewitness identification procedures, addressing those problems will in turn minimize at least to some extent the pernicious effects of race. In Chris’s case, if police had been required to videotape his interrogation, the false confession could have been prevented, and the racial bias that infected the interrogation would not have been expressed with such tragic consequences.

At a very fundamental level, cases like Chris Ochoa’s not only highlight the flaws in the system, but also reveal how innately we value justice. On Chris’s second day of freedom he flew home from Austin to El Paso with his mother, part of his legal defense team, and a media crew. One of the irrepressible Wisconsin law students who worked on the case convinced the flight crew to let him announce over the loudspeaker that Chris was on the flight, on his way home after 12 years of wrongful imprisonment. The passengers erupted in applause and cheers. A man from the back approached, congratulated Chris, and handed him a $20 bill. This man then took up a collection on the plane and presented Chris with more than $500 in an airline sickness bag to help him get started again.

It was hard to imagine that it was these same good citizens in whose name the State of Texas had threatened to kill Chris, and then wrongly imprisoned him for so many years. They and the other Chris Ochoas of the world deserve better, and can have better. We only need to listen and learn. 🌋

Keith Findley and John Pray are Clinical Associate Professors at the University of Wisconsin Law School’s Frank J. Remington Center. In 1998, they created the Wisconsin Innocence Project and have served as co-directors since that time. The project’s 20 law students investigate innocence claims for prisoners from Wisconsin and throughout the country. In addition to their duties at the Innocence Project, Professors Findley and Pray co-direct the Remington Center’s Criminal Appeals Project. Keith Findley is a 1985 graduate of the Yale Law School, and previously served as an appellate and trial level assistant state public defender in Madison. John Pray is a 1986 graduate of the University of Wisconsin Law School and has taught law at the Remington Center since 1986.