

**SOURCE: Lesson Presumed Innocent?  
The Social Science of Wrongful Conviction  
Lesson 3**

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<https://class.coursera.org/wrongfulconviction-002>

**Scenario 1**

A county sheriff, responding to a 911 call in a rural area, found a woman who had been stabbed several times. After searching the home, he found Stephanie Wilson asleep in a bedroom. A bloody knife was found near the bed. In a subsequent trial, the state was able to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Ms. Wilson stabbed her mother, Sharon Dixon, more than twenty times. Ms. Wilson said she committed the stabbing after her mother refused to let her watch television. A jury found her guilty of second-degree murder, and the judge sentenced her to thirty years in prison.

Ms. Wilson had severe cognitive impairment, with the mental capacity of a 7-year-old child. In her mind, the stabbing was not going to result in death or even serious injury. Although her lawyer brought up her mental condition at trial, the prosecutor told the jury that Ms. Wilson was “overplaying” her condition and knew what she was doing because she told police she didn’t like when her mother told her “no.” Ms. Wilson believes her mother is still alive and, on most nights, she cries in the prison and asks why her mother does not visit her. She is kept in the prison’s psychiatric unit.

**Scenario 2**

Frank Jackson was working the nightshift at a car manufacturing plant when he saw his supervisor and two police officers approaching him. The officers told him that his home was on fire, and Mr. Jackson asked, “Where is Melinda?” Melinda, Mr. Jackson’s wife, was not found until three days after the fire. She perished in the blaze.

The fire investigator later determined that the cause of the fire was arson. Police suspected Mr. Jackson because several of his neighbors said that they heard arguing in the days preceding the fire. After a thorough investigation, police concluded that Mr. Jackson started the blaze to collect on a \$100,000 insurance policy. He was convicted in a bench trial and sentenced to life in prison for the first-degree murder of his wife. After trial, the city razed the home and sold the lot to a local developer. Unbeknownst to police and the fire investigator, the fire was *actually* caused by an electrical problem. The investigator made an unintentional error.

**Scenario 3**

Neal Conway was a well-known petty criminal in his small town. He was routinely arrested for public intoxication, simple assault, shoplifting, and other small charges. One evening, a police officer was

driving down the rural street where Neal lived. The officer was on his regular patrol. As he drove past Neal's house, the officer saw the lights from a large television. Neal had no money! How could he afford that? While the officer had no warrant, he decided to investigate.

The officer pulled over and knocked on Neal's door. No one answered, and Neal's truck was not at the house. The officer tried the door, and it was unlocked. He walked inside to inspect the television when he noticed several bags of heroin on a kitchen table. Neal arrived home soon after and was arrested for possession of drugs and drug paraphernalia. At trial, Neal's public defender argued that the heroin evidence should be excluded because the officer did not have a warrant. The judge rejected that argument saying, "Your client has a reputation. Everyone knows that. About time we send him to jail for a long time." The judge allowed the evidence. The jury met only thirty minutes before returning their guilty verdict. This time Neal was sentenced to three years in the state penitentiary.

#### **Scenario 4**

After police found the body of Laurie Johnson in a lake, they had every reason to suspect that Drue Lincoln was her killer. Everyone in town knew Drue's wife, Betsy, and Laurie did not get along. The two were once co-owners of a handmade soap business in town, but Betsy caught Laurie stealing money. That led to a series of accusations, arguments, and now the police thought—murder. The police suspected that Laurie was both cut and bludgeoned to death. One of Drue's neighbors reported seeing Drue with a large blade only a few days previously. When asked about the blade, Drue said he threw it away.

After nearly six hours of intense interrogation, a detective said to Drue, "That's it, we're done. Tomorrow I'm talking to the prosecutor, and unless you start to talk, we're going to seek the death penalty!" Suddenly Drue said, "I did it. I admit, I did it. Please, I don't want to be sentenced to death." In court, Drue testified and said his confession was made out of fear but was not true. The jury didn't buy it. Drue was found guilty of murder. Laurie was murdered, but not by Drue. She was killed by Jeremy King, a former boyfriend of Laurie. No one suspected Jeremy, who lived in another state. He was on a business trip and took a detour to see Laurie. They got into an argument, it escalated, and Jeremy killed her with a shovel and then brought her to the lake. He left town before anyone knew he was there.

We will tie back to these scenarios throughout this lesson and in the discussion forums.

Next: Wrongful Conviction Defined