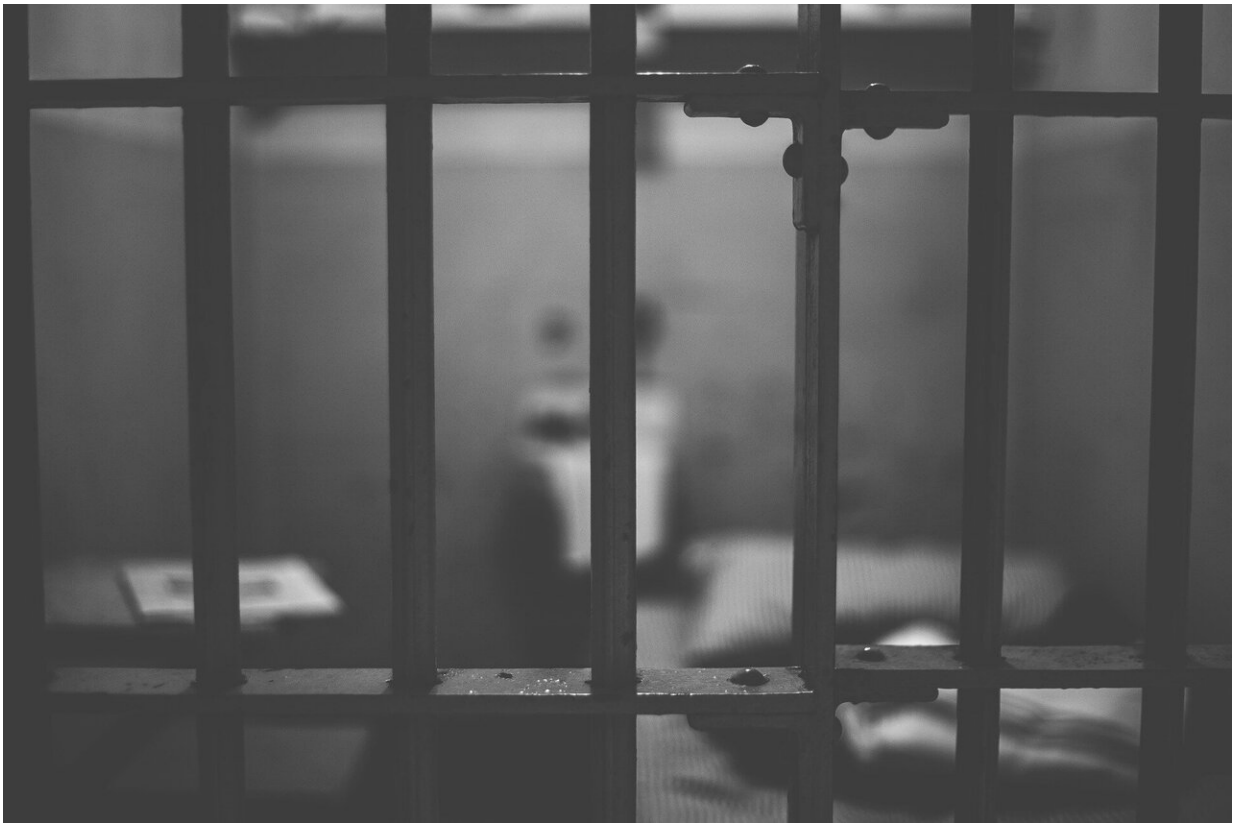


Public opinion on wrongful convictions swayed by entertainment series, study finds

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Americans are hooked on the Netflix series *When They See Us*, which reconstructs the true story of five Harlem teens falsely accused of a brutal crime.

But a new study suggests entertainment programs about cases of wrongful conviction actually change [public opinion](#) more effectively than facts or statistics.

That's the finding of Kevin Mullinix, assistant professor of political science at the University of Kansas. His article (co-written with Robert Norris) titled "Framing Innocence: An Experimental Test of the Effects of Wrongful Convictions on Public Opinion" can be found this month in the *Journal of Experimental Criminology*.

"Advocacy organizations often want to know, 'How do we persuade people to care about this issue and support policy reforms?' Our study would suggest that if you want people to support [policy change](#), then you probably want to communicate [accurate information](#) through narratives and stories," Mullinix said.

Mullinix noted that according to the National Registry of Exonerations, nearly 2,500 individuals in the United States were exonerated after being found guilty of crimes they did not commit over the last 30 years. Those convicted served an average of almost nine years in prison.

"When we give people numbers about a society, they think broadly, and it impacts things like their trust in the justice system," he said. "When we give them a narrative such as *When They See Us* that elicits emotional reactions, they get concerned and actively want change."

Mullinix, an expert in public opinion and public policy, and Norris (author of "Exonerated: A History of the Innocence Movement") began discussing this project while both were faculty members at Appalachian State University. They were first prompted by the *Serial* podcast, the Netflix docuseries *Making a Murderer* and increasing media attention to wrongful convictions.

"Any time there is an important problem in society that's getting media attention, I usually want to know what the effects are on people's attitudes. Is it shifting the way they're thinking about the justice system? Is it impacting things like their punitiveness, their willingness to support capital punishment?" Mullinix said.

His methods hinged on two national surveys in which he embedded experiments to examine how wrongful convictions affect public opinion. These compared/contrasted [statistical information](#) about such convictions with stories spotlighting individual cases. More than a thousand people were surveyed in each study.

The Topeka native explains that giving people only statistics makes them view cases as a general societal problem. But presenting a specific case narrative, which he terms an "episodic frame," compels them to focus more on a particular individual and situation.

"It can also prompt these more [emotional reactions](#) that lead people to seek bigger policy changes. It's on the narrative we see the bigger effect on death penalty attitudes and supporting policy reforms that mitigate a likelihood of wrongful convictions," Mullinix said.

One of the obstacles when working with this topic is how unaware many people are to the prevalence of innocence among prisoners. (Just look at the case of the Central Park Five.)

"We tend to think the justice system gets it right most of the time," he said. "It's really easy for us to pretend that doesn't happen or doesn't happen with much frequency. But each one of the (thousands of) verified exonerations since 1989 is a story where somebody's life was changed forever."

Now that this information is out there, what kind of change is he hoping

to induce?

"One of the big problems is with eyewitness testimony and eyewitness identification procedures. So you see some states and police jurisdictions making changes to that, forensic procedures and oversight, and to the way interrogations are conducted. Sometimes there are false confessions, and even things like videotaping interrogations can help with that," he said.

Mullinix, who earned his master's degree at KU and doctorate at Northwestern University, has just completed his first year back at his Jayhawk alma mater. He and Norris plan to expand their research into a book project.

He said, "I hope this calls attention and provides recognition to the power of narratives to prompt concern about important problems and shape attitudes we thought were pretty entrenched."

More information: Robert J. Norris et al. Framing innocence: an experimental test of the effects of wrongful convictions on public opinion, *Journal of Experimental Criminology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s11292-019-09360-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-019-09360-7)

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