

Search for Persons With Intellectual Disabilities Who Confessed to Serious Crimes They Did Not Commit

Robert Perske

The following persons with intellectual disabilities confessed to serious crimes—murder, rape, arson, and robbery. Later, the legal system found them innocent of the crimes to which they confessed. Presently, the list names 38 individuals. Thanks to advancing forensic practices, more names are being added to this list every month. For example, DNA has recently excluded 3 more wrong-person convictions, but they will not be listed until the courts rule. The search gives rise to six factors that may be well worth pondering:

1. Almost half have been exonerated by DNA tests.
2. In some cases the real perpetrators finally confessed to the crimes in question.
3. In all 38 cases, a lawyer was not present during the interrogations.
4. Although some of these persons confessed as early as 1975, not many of them were exonerated until after 1990.
5. One might feel like shuddering after wondering about the number of wrong-person cases left undiscovered before 1990.
6. These factors could change the geometry of America's criminal justice system.

This list was created after a three-way sharing of files between law professor Steven Drizin, criminologist Richard Leo, and myself. The idea of making such a compilation was inspired by what they wrote in their groundbreaking work on false confession in a post-DNA (Drizin & Leo, 2004). Anyone discovering similar cases are urged to contact me at Rperske@aol.com.

The following legally proven false confessors have been listed alphabetically and by the year and state in which they confessed.

Cleared When Real Perpetrator Confesses: Gabriel Baddeley (2001, Washington)

Baddeley, age 19, "with fetal alcohol effect" was coerced into confessing to setting fire to the high

school where he was a student. According to him, he told the police what they wanted to hear because he feared a harsher sentence. He spent months in custody in a mental hospital while being evaluated for competency to stand trial. He was sentenced to 3 months in jail and ordered to pay \$650,000 in restitution. Two years later, a young woman in therapy came forward as the true arsonist. She provided the necessary evidence showing that she, indeed, was the one who set the high school on fire (Courtney, 2004).

Murder by Thermostat: Eunice Baker (1999, New York)

Baker, a 23-year-old woman "with IQ tests in the 70s," was hired to babysit for 3-year-old Charlotte Kurtz. On that summer night, the child died in her bedroom from hypothermia. A state trooper got Baker to confess that she willfully killed the child by turning up the thermostat. At trial, she was unable to show how to operate a thermostat. Also, a technician described an electrical short in the heating system. Baker was convicted of 2nd degree murder. After almost 5 years behind bars, the murder conviction was thrown out (Chittum, 2000; Nogas, 2000a, 2000b).

Murder of an Infant Who Never Existed: Victoria Banks (1999, Alabama)

While in jail awaiting trial for an unrelated crime, Banks claimed to be pregnant. She did it to garner sympathy and to get out of jail. The ploy worked, and she was released. A couple of months later, a sheriff asked her about the baby, and she told him the baby had died. She, her husband, Medell, and her sister, Dianne Tucker, underwent intense questioning over 5 days. Then the three, all "with mental retardation," confessed to murdering the baby and were charged with capital murder. Victoria accepted a plea bargain to avoid a longer

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prison sentence. Later, it was discovered that Victoria had undergone a tubal ligation 4 years earlier and was unable to have children (Luo, 2002).

The husband of Victoria Banks, a man "with IQ 40," also underwent intense interrogation for 5 grueling days. He confessed, pled guilty, and was sentenced to 15 years. He was released after it became clear that Victoria was unable to give birth to the child she purportedly murdered (Luo, 2002).

A Murder That Never Occurred: Leonard Barco (1985, New Jersey)

Barco's girlfriend was found dead in her car. Bruising on the victim's neck and chest led investigators to believe she had been strangled. After interrogation, Barco, "with IQ 57," confessed to beating her to death with a stick. He spent 8 months in jail awaiting his trial. Finally, his public defender called for a reexamination of the body and found she had actually died from a lethal level of alcohol. The bruising was consistent with injuries typical of alcoholics. The murder charges were dropped (Associated Press, 1986).

A Brag That Could Have Been Fatal: Willie Bennett (1989, Massachusetts)

A husband, lost in the city, frantically called for help on the cell phone in his car. He said a man just killed his wife and wounded him. A heroic police dispatcher located the car. The national media focused on the case and created a national uproar. The police received a tip that Willie Bennett told his friends that he did the crime. They arrested him based on his street confession, even though he refused to confess to the police. The media described the victims as the "Camelot Couple," and Bennett was called "an urban savage." The police managed to get Bennett's public school records, listing him as "mental defective with IQs of 64, 65, and 62." When it seemed like the whole nation wanted Bennett dead, the husband—the real killer—committed suicide by jumping off a bridge (Barnicle, 1990).

Saved by DNA: Corethian Bell (2000, Illinois)

After his mother was murdered, Bell, "a man with mild retardation," was submitted to over 50 hours of questioning before he confessed. The DNA

evidence exonerated the man after he spent 17 months in jail (Scharnberg & Mills, 2002).

Saved by DNA: Melvin Bennett (1990, North Carolina)

A 7-year-old girl was raped and murdered; Bennett, a man "diagnosed as mentally retarded," confessed to both crimes. Finally, DNA evidence excluded him as the perpetrator. Bennett spent 2 years in custody before a jury acquitted him (Aheran, 1998).

Saved by DNA: Keith Brown (1991, North Carolina)

A woman was raped. Brown, a man "who is mentally retarded," confessed and accepted a plea bargain of 35 years. After spending 6 years in prison, he was exonerated by DNA. The same DNA evidence implicated the true perpetrator (Associated Press, 1997).

Beaten Into Confessing: Timothy Brown (1991, Florida)

A sheriff's deputy was murdered in his patrol car. Brown, age 15, "with an IQ of 57," was arrested, shackled to the floor, beaten, and threatened with the electric chair until he confessed. No physical evidence tied him or a 17-year-old confessing friend to the crime. A confidential informant provided evidence that another sheriff's deputy admitted to committing the murder. What was divulged matched the evidence at the crime scene so closely that the governor ordered an independent investigation. The two deputies who battered the two young suspects abruptly retired (de Vise & De-Marzo, 2002; McMahon & Friedberg, 2002).

Saved by DNA: Jacob Alien Chestnut (1998, Maryland)

A man was stabbed to death. The police observed a fresh cut on the hand and blood on the clothes of Chestnut. After 15 exhausting hours of questioning, the teenager confessed to the murder. After 6 months in jail, he was excluded as the real perpetrator by DNA testing (Richissin, 1998).

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Antwon Cole man (1990, Missouri)**

A homeless man was beaten to death and Coleman confessed to the murder. According to his lawyer, Coleman, a 17-year-old "with learning disabilities," would have confessed to anything." Five teenagers were charged and held in custody for 6 weeks. They were released after the true perpetrator confessed and pled guilty (Sorkin, 1990).

**Russian Roulette Goes Wrong: Ricky
Cullipher (1996, Virginia)**

Cullipher was "hanging out" with friends when one of them was crippled from a wound to the head. Everyone in the room told investigators the victim shot himself, but the victim claimed Cullipher did it. After hours of intense questioning, the "16-year-old "learning disabled" Cullipher confessed and was convicted. Later, the victim was caught on videotape saying he actually shot himself during a game of Russian Roulette. A judge overruled the conviction and the state refused to retry the case (Rob-erson & Lenz, 2001).

**Bystander Speaks Up: Gerald Delay (1992,
Kansas)**

The victim was shot with an antique ball-and-cap pistol. The killers pulled out the victim's teeth, cut away his tattoos, lashed him to a steel beam, and threw him into the river. After his body was recovered, Delay, "a man with mental retardation," confessed to the crime. Finally, a bystander to the shooting overcame his fear and spoke to the police about what really happened. Charges against Delay were dismissed (Fry, 1993).

**Man Describes Own Interrogation: Michael
Fitzpatrick (1991, New York)**

This man "with autism" was picked up and questioned by a small-town police chief about a bank robbery. Although there was no record made of the interrogation, he signed a confession. Five months later, the true perpetrator stepped forward and confessed. Had the case gone to trial, a jury would have heard an amazing recital by Fitzpatrick, who possessed an uncanny knack of recall that is sometimes a characteristic of persons with autism.

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After the interrogation, he wrote a verbatim statement of all that went on between him and the police chief. Some of the statements were hilarious. For example, the Chief "told me that he would talk to me like a father to a son. So I said, 'Okay, Dad'" (O'Brien, 1999).

**Saved by DNA: Michael Gayles
(1992, Michigan)**

Gayles, 18, with "an IQ of 71" underwent 36 hours of interrogation before confessing to the rape and murder of a 12-year-old girl. He signed a typed confession that he could not read. Two weeks after his arrest Gayles was exonerated by DNA evidence, and he was released (Kresnak, 2001).

**Freed After Real Murderer Confesses:
Anthony Gray Jr. (1991, Maryland)**

Police interrogators convinced this man "with learning disabilities and borderline mental retardation" that two other suspects had implicated him in the rape and murder of a woman. So, in his compliant way, he confessed to being their "look out." Gayle spent 6 years in prison before the real perpetrator confessed to the crime (Richissin, 1999).

**Saved by DNA: Paula Gray
(1978, Illinois)**

Police brought in this 17-year-old "with mental retardation" for questioning based on a tip. After 2 nights of intense questioning, Gray confessed that she was with four men who abducted a man and woman, raped the woman, and killed them both. Under pressure, she fingered four men as perpetrators. All were convicted. Seventeen years later, DNA revealed that Gray and the four men were innocent. The same evidence implicated the real perpetrators, who eventually confessed (Frievoegel, 2000).

**Saved by DNA: Alejandro "Alex"
Hernandez (1984, Illinois)**

This 20-year-old man's "erratic and loquacious nature" made him a suspect in the break-in, abduction, rape, and murder of a 10-year-old girl. Hernandez's "IQ had been measured at various times in the mid to low 70s." Four detectives took turns

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pressuring him. Finally, Hernandez broke the case open when he said, "All I did was hold her down." After 12 years on death row, Alex was exonerated when DNA identified the real killer (Firsbie & Garrett 1998).

Saved by DNA: David Alien Jones (1992, California)

Jones, *SL* man with "IQs ranging from 60 to 73 and unable to read words longer than four letters," was picked up and questioned about three murders and a rape. He confessed to all of them and was convicted in 1995. Because of his confession, little attention was paid to the blood and hair samples taken in the case. Later, the samples and DNA connected the crimes to another man. Looking back at the interrogation transcripts, it became clear that Jones merely parroted fictions created by the interrogators. A lawyer selected by the police commission to investigate the case stated that the interrogators "could have convinced Jones he was spi-derman" had they chosen to do so. Sadly, while the wrong man was in prison, the real one succeeded in raping and murdering 10 other women (Blankstein, German, & Larrubiam 2004).

Freed After Real Murderer Confesses: Charles King (1992, Illinois)

After a 9-year-old girl was found strangled by a belt, King, a man with an "IQ of 57" was brought in for questioning. After 3 days, he signed a written confession even though he could not read or write. In jail and awaiting trial, only one thing seemed to be on his mind. He wanted to know when someone would bring his crayons and coloring books. Finally, a serial killer was apprehended, and solid evidence connected the killing of the 9-year-old to him. After a year and a month of incarceration, King was released (King, 1998).

Saved by DNA: William M. Kelly Jr. (1990, Pennsylvania)

The police claimed that "mildly retarded" Kelly told them things about the rape and killing of a woman that only the killer could know. Furthermore, the police said that Kelly led them to the murder site. Later, DNA excluded Kelly as the killer and identified the real one. Kelly was released after 3 years in prison (Shellem, 2003b).

Saved by DNA: Barry Laughman (1987, Pennsylvania)

This man "with an IQ of 70" was convicted of raping and murdering an elderly woman. A state trooper was assigned to the case, and he immediately targeted Laughman. After the trooper convinced Laughman that his fingerprints were found at the murder site, he confessed. After 16 years in prison, DNA evidence excluded Laughman as the killer (Shellem, 2003a).

Saved by DNA: Ryan Matthews (1997, Louisiana)

This is a case in which 17-year-old Matthews "with IQ 71" was convicted of murdering a grocer. From the moment of his arrest, he claimed to be innocent. The conviction was based on a 17-year-old friend who, under pressure, confessed that Matthews did the crime and he only drove the getaway car. The friend was convicted for second-degree murder for his alleged involvement—which he recanted later. Saliva in a ski mask that was left outside the grocery store connected the murder to the real killer (Filosa, 2004).

Saved by DNA: Calvin Ollins (1986, Illinois)

This 14-year-old "with an IQ between 65 and 70" was one of four teenagers who confessed to raping and murdering a medical student. The investigators said that if he signed the confession paper he could go home. He signed. After 15 years in prison, DNA excluded him as the perpetrator (Possley & Mills, 2001).

Shortest Confession Ever: Brian Oltmanns (1992, South Dakota)

Oltmanns, 28, "with cerebral palsy and mild retardation" was unconscious when he was rescued from an apartment building fire in which two people died. He was hospitalized for 3 weeks for carbon monoxide poisoning, smoke inhalation, and burns. Upon release, Oltmanns was asked to come to the police station. Still groggy, he thought he was going down merely to be fingerprinted. Upon his arrival, however, he was questioned about the fire. He took a polygraph test and the officers said he was lying.

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When he tired of the questioning, he walked out. Then feeling some guilt about leaving like that, he walked back in and said he was sorry about the fire and did not mean for anyone to get hurt. At that point, Oltmanns scrawled a sentence on a paper that said, "I accidentally started the fire with lighter fluid and match." Then he walked away and came back to tell them he was retracting what he wrote. Oltmanns was charged with two counts of first degree murder, two counts of second degree murder, and arson. Two years later, the South Dakota Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling to throw out the confession. After that the prosecution dropped the case. They had no other items of evidence to present (Trautmann, 1994).

A Mile From the Crime: Don Olmetti (1997, Illinois)

A teacher was robbed and murdered. Police picked up 16-year-old Olmetti after receiving a tip. The teenager "who is borderline mentally retarded" was questioned by the police for 18 hours before confessing to the crime. Olmetti claimed that the police beat him and forced him to sign the confession. Teachers at another school one mile away vigorously claimed that Olmetti was present with them at the time of the crime. After Olmetti spent 2 years in jail awaiting trial, the murder charges were dropped (Rossi & Tucker, 1997).

Saved by DNA: Ronald Paccagnella (1995, Wisconsin)

A 78-year-old woman was raped and murdered. Area-canvassing police turned up at a boarding house. They asked to search rooms, and Paccagnella, "a man with IQ 61" invited them in. Finding bloodstained clothing, they took him to the station for questioning. He responded with a wide range of conflicting accounts. Finally, as pressure mounted, the man asked if he could go home if he apologized to the victim. He spent 10 months in jail before DNA testing showed that the blood on the clothing was his own. A month after Paccagnella's release, the real killer was identified and convicted (Doege, 1996).

Fever for a Confession: Melvin Reynolds (1979, Missouri)

A 4-year-old child was carried away during daylight hours and murdered. The pressure on the po-

lice to get the killer was tremendous. Then came an anonymous tip that Reynolds, 25, a man with "mild mental retardation" could be the killer. The police, led by an unrelenting chief, did everything possible to get "the right words" out of Reynolds. The attempts included two long polygraph tests, hypnosis, and sodium amytal injections. Finally, after 7 months of harassment, the police brought Reynolds in for a marathon interrogation that lasted 14 hours. "Reynolds finally looked up like a dog with his ears pressed against his head and said, 'I'll say so if you want me to.'" The next day, the chief called a press conference and announced that the case was solved. Reynolds was convicted. Four years later, an FBI agent tied the crime to a serial killer who later confessed to the child's murder before a judge. Reynolds was released, but the chief refused to accept the truth. Being a political power, he pressured the FBI to transfer the agent who had upset his beliefs. The agent was transferred from Missouri to Hawaii (Ganey, 1989).

Saved by DNA: Lafonso Rollins (1993, Illinois)

This 17-year-old "special education student" was arrested in connection with a series of sexual assaults on elderly women in a public housing building. His reading and writing skills were "seriously limited." He signed confessions for three assaults and was charged with four. The police told him that if he signed them he could go home. He received a 75-year sentence. Although DNA tests were planned, his attorney was suspended indefinitely for "multiple acts of neglect" before they were completed. Eleven years later, the tests were performed and showed that Rollins was innocent of all the crimes for which he was charged.

A Spring Break Misfire: Donald Shoup (1996, Florida)

On a Friday in March, a Canadian student on spring break was fatally shot in the back of the head. On Saturday, the police picked up odd, loquacious, happy-go-lucky, beach-loving 18-year-old Shoup. By 3:00 a.m. on Sunday morning, the police received a full confession. When the police gave the confession to the media, they added that Shoup had "an IQ of 62." Three weeks later, the real shooter and two accomplices were charged with the

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murder. Even so, Shoup was not released until August (Ditzler, 1996; Holland, 1996).

Saved by DNA After 22 Years: Jerry Frank Town send (1979, Florida)

Townsend's defenders called him "a human parrot." When he was questioned about the murders of six women, 38-year-old Townsend, a man "with an IQ of 56," confessed to all of them. After ordering Townsend's release from prison, the judge called Townsend, who was 50, "the victim of an enormous tragedy." His defense lawyers have maintained that "the mentally disabled man was easily led to confess by detectives because he wanted to please them" (Farrington 2001; Friedberg & Smith 2001).

Murder of an Infant Who Never Existed: Dianne Tucker (1999, Alabama)

Tucker was interrogated for 5 grueling days with her sister, Victoria Banks, and brother-in-law, Medell Ranks, who were discussed earlier in this article. All three were "mentally retarded." After Tucker confessed to helping with the murder of Victoria's newborn infant, she entered into a plea bargain for a 15-year sentence. Like her sister and brother-in-law, she was released after it became clear that Victoria could not bear a child because of a tubal ligation 4 years earlier (Luo, 2002).

Saved by DNA: David Vasquez (1984, Virginia)

Detectives approached Vasquez, 37, "a man with mental retardation," while he engaged in janitorial work at a McDonald's restaurant. They asked him to come to headquarters with them. With a tape recorder running, the detectives described the murder of a woman who had been raped and strangled with a Venetian blind cord. Finally, they confronted him and told him they had evidence to show that he was the killer. Too naive to believe that policemen would lie, he broke down and cried for his mother. Three intense interrogations took place. During the third one, he stared at a spot on the table. In this dreamlike state, his meek, pleading voice became low-pitched and steady as he described how he killed the woman. His lawyer convinced him to take a plea bargain to keep from

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being executed. Later, the police connected the crime to the real perpetrator with the first successful use of DNA testing. Vasquez received a pardon on January 4, 1989, 5 years to the day after the detectives approached him at McDonald's (Mones, 1995; Priest, 1989).

Saved by Good Neighbors: Delbert Ward (1990, New York)

The four "Ward Boys—William, 67, Delbert, 59, Lyman, 62, and Roscoe, 70—were "illiterate and mentally retarded." They operated their farm like their deceased father did it many years earlier. They were somewhat distant from their neighbors until Lyman died in his bed, and Delbert was taken to a state trooper barracks and forced to confess to killing him by somehow putting his hand over the mouth and nose of his brother. When the court appointed a lawyer, the neighbors closed ranks around the "boys." They took up collections. They gained the services of a skilled criminal lawyer. During the trial, the neighbors packed the courtroom. The jury voted for acquittal (Perske, 1991).

Saved by DNA: Earl Washington, Jr. (1983, Virginia)

This 23-year-old man "with mental retardation" was a compliant fellow. He sat in a sheriff's office and took the blame for every crime that was mentioned. They included three break-ins, two malicious woundings, an attempted rape, two actual rapes, two robberies, burglary, and capital murder. He went to trial for the worst rape and murder just 8 months later and was sentenced to death. In 1985, Washington was only days away from execution when a fellow death row inmate sounded an alarm that Washington was about to die without a lawyer. For the next 17 years, a slew of lawyers and citizen advocates battled the state for Earl's life. Interestingly, the state fought back viciously—until a series of DNA tests (some hidden by the state) showed that Washington did not commit the crime. The story of that battle has now been voiced in a best-selling nonfiction book (Edds, 2003).

Cleared When Real Killer Confesses: Robert Wilkinson (1975, Pennsylvania)

A home was firebombed, resulting in the death of five people. Wilkinson, "a man who is mentally

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retarded" was "stomped," beaten with a blackjack, and told he would never see his wife and child again. After Wilkinson spent 15 months in jail, a judge threw out the confession, when he discovered that Wilkinson signed a confession that he was unable to read. Later, a neighbor confessed and was convicted for the crime. The six detectives who beat Wilkinson were sent to a prison camp for 15 months for conspiring to use threats and beatings to coerce a statement (Editorial, 1979).

Pardoned by Governor: Johnny Lee Wilson (1986, Missouri)

A 79-year-old woman was bound up with duct tape and burned alive in her small-town home. Based on a tip, the police interrogated Wilson, a 20-year-old with "organic brain damage and mental retardation." A tape-recording of the interrogation showed how detectives blatantly spoon-fed the words they wanted Wilson to say. Then a judge unwittingly scared him into pleading guilty by telling him that if he went to trial he could be sentenced to death. Wilson pled guilty. Later, the real killer, doing time for a similar murder in Kansas, confessed to the murder of the woman in Missouri. Furthermore, he provided solid evidence showing that he did indeed know things about the crime that only the killer could know (Perske, 1994). Consequently, a courageous governor pardoned Wilson. In his pardon, he said, "It is evident that the only facts this mentally retarded man knew about this hideous crime were the facts given to him by investigators who felt pressure to solve the case quickly" (Carnahan, 1995).

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In the cases discussed in this paper, I alluded to persons with intellectual, cognitive, and developmental disabilities. Whenever an observation contained mention of a person's disability label, I used quotation marks. I chose to do so because today's professionals are constantly coming up with new labels to replace old ones.

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