

# Why Do Innocent Suspects Confess? ; It's Pressure, Fatigue or Fear

Wilson, Mark, Evansville Courier & Press (2007-Current)

Short of having a crime suspect's fingerprints or DNA, a confession is often considered some of the strongest evidence police and prosecutors can have, if they can prove it. However, suspects sometimes falsely confess to crimes they didn't commit. False confessions often lead to convictions even when people recant their stories.

About 80 percent of the false confessions that go to trial end with convictions, said Northwestern University law professor Steven Drizin.

Drizin, a nationally recognized expert on false confession, police interrogations and juvenile justice, testified at the murder trial of Evansville teenager William Hurt in February. A jury found Hurt not guilty.

Drizin said Hurt's confession contained all of the elements included in proven false confession cases even though police couldn't find other proof that Hurt did not commit the crime - or that he did it.

"False confessions are one of the five most common causes of wrongful convictions," said Larry Landis, executive director of the Indiana Public Defender Council. "It's a growing concern. When juries hear a confession, often they don't need anything else. It's very powerful evidence. We know this from all the DNA exonerations."

More than 290 wrongful convictions have been overturned by DNA evidence in the United States, and more than 25 percent of those have involved confessions, according to the Innocence Project, an organization that works to exonerate wrongfully convicted prisoners through DNA testing.

The reasons are varied, but a growing body of evidence suggests police-induced false confessions are among the main causes of wrongful convictions - and may be the leading cause of wrongful convictions in homicide convictions, according to experts at FalseConfessions.org, a public advocacy organization.

The group of legal and media experts works to raise awareness of the incidence of false confessions in criminal prosecutions leading to wrongful convictions and support reforms to prevent false confessions.

Homicide cases accounted for more than 80 percent of 125 false confessions documented by Drizin and Richard Leo, a false confessions expert and University of San Francisco law professor, according to the group.

Often, people convicted after falsely confessing are exonerated only after the real perpetrator is found or new scientific evidence discovered.

Vanderburgh County Prosecutor Nicholas Hermann declined to talk specifically about the evidence in Hurt's case because there was still an open investigation into Golike's death.

He acknowledged that confessions can be important to cases but he said prosecutors can't rely solely on confessions.

"Whatever the defendant says is obviously part of what we consider, but it's only part of it," he said. "The legal status of confessions are that you can confess to anything but no crimes occurred unless you prove it. You have to have the facts to back up the confession."

Hermann said confessions give investigators a place to start.

"Our best evidence in any case comes from people who were present and that includes defendants," Hermann said. "So we're very interested in what a defendant says but then we have to work backward and see if it is even possible."

As in Hurt's case, who was barely 18 when he confessed to murder, many of those who falsely implicate themselves in crimes are young. Many others are mentally handicapped or ill.

"It's a recurring issue, especially for somebody who is young, not particularly strong willed," Landis said.

Landis said he doesn't believe police usually set out to elicit false confessions but in their zeal to get the guilty, police can lose sight of the bigger picture.

"They fixate on a particular suspect and look for evidence of guilt, not for innocence. I don't really believe police want to convict innocent people," he said.

Jeff Vantlin, a detective at the Evansville Police Department, acknowledged police do often have an idea what they are looking for when they call somebody in for an interview.

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