

The Central Park Five

In 1989, a young woman jogging in New York’s Central Park was raped and beaten nearly to death. This high-profile attack upon a white investment banker in the heart of the city was quickly called the “crime of the century.” There was intense public pressure to solve the case and, indeed, the police quickly arrested five young (14 to 16 years old) men who were black and Latino. They had been part of a larger group of young men harassing passersby in another part of the park.

After intense interrogations ranging from 14 to 30 hours in length, four of the five confessed to the crime. The five were charged with the attack. Importantly, (a) the boys soon recanted their confessions which they blamed on police coercion, (b) no physical evidence linked the young men to the crime, (c) no physical evidence indicated that there was more than one attacker, (d) the semen found in the victim did not match any of the young men, and (e) the four confessions were inconsistent with each other and with the physical evidence from the crime scene. Nonetheless, the young men were convicted and sent to jail. Real estate developer Donald Trump called for their swift execution in a full-page newspaper ad.

Thirteen years later, Matias Reyes, who was serving a life sentence for murder, confessed to the crime. Indeed, his DNA matched the semen recovered from the victim. His was the only semen recovered from the victim. The attack on the jogger was similar in M.O. to his other rapes, none of which involved any other perpetrator.

Eventually the Central Park 5 settled a wrongful conviction lawsuit with the City of New York for \$41 million.

However, the indisputable and overwhelming evidence of their innocence did not change the minds of:



- The lead prosecutor, who claimed that the five young men were indeed still guilty and that Reyes was simply an additional perpetrator—an “unindicted co-ejaculator.”
- The head detective, who said: ‘This lunatic [Reyes] concocts this wild story and these people fell for it.’
- Donald Trump who in 2013 tweeted regarding Ken Burns’ award-winning documentary on the Central Park 5’s innocence: “The Central Park Five documentary was a one sided piece of garbage that didn’t explain the horrific crimes of these young men while in park.”
- The second chair lawyer in the prosecution who in 2018 still finds the taped confessions “pretty compelling” notwithstanding their inconsistencies and the fact that of the first 325 DNA exonerations in the U.S., 27% involved false confessions.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you see instances of cognitive dissonance in this case study? Explain.
2. Why do you think the two prosecutors and the police officer found it difficult to accept the new evidence regarding Reyes' guilt?
3. Why do you think Donald Trump finds it difficult to accept the new evidence regarding Reyes' guilt?
4. Sears and colleagues suggest that the following factors can render cognitive dissonance especially acute. Were any of them at play in the Central Park 5 case?
 - a. Irrevocable commitment—the stronger one is committed to a position, the more intense will be the dissonance stemming from evidence indicating that the position is wrong.
 - b. Foreseeable consequences—the more easily foreseen the consequences of taking an erroneous position, the more acute will be the dissonance when evidence starts to arise that the position is wrong.
 - c. Responsibility for consequences—the more someone feels personally responsible for the erroneous position taken, the more acute he or she will feel the dissonance when evidence starts to arise that the position is wrong.
 - d. Effort—the more effort someone has put into taking the erroneous position, the more wedded he or she will be to it and the more they will resist new, inconsistent evidence.
5. Do you find it difficult to accept evidence indicating that a position you have publicly maintained in the past is wrong?
6. The Central Park 5 had been released from jail by the time Reyes confessed. If they had still been in jail, and prosecutors and police resisted their release despite Reyes' confession and the supporting evidence, would that have been an unethical act on their part?
7. What factors discussed in other Ethics Unwrapped videos might have contributed to a "rush to judgment" by police and prosecutors in 1989?

Resources:

Sarah Burns, *The Central Park Five: A Chronicle of a City Wilding* (2011).

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Graham Rayman, "Central Park Five Prosecutor Breaks Silence, Says It Was a Mistake to Vacate Convictions and Pay Off Accused Teens," *Daily News*, July 19, 2018.

<https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/ny-news-tim-clements-central-park-five-20180713-story.html>

Amy Davidson Sorkin, *Donald Trump and the Central Park Five*, *The New Yorker*, June 23, 2014.

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson/donald-trump-and-the-central-park-five>

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<https://www.villagevoice.com/2002/11/19/a-journey-through-the-tangled-case-of-the-central-park-jogger/>

David Sears et al., *Social Psychology* (1991).

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