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Mass exoneration: Convictions of 15 men, tied to tainted CPD officer, overturned

By [John Garcia](#) and Cate Cauguiran and Craig Wall 

Thursday, November 16, 2017



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In what's being called the first mass exoneration in the history of Cook County, criminal charges against 15 former inmates were officially thrown out by a judge Thursday morning.

CHICAGO (WLS) -- In what's being called the first mass exoneration in the history of Cook County, criminal charges against 15 former inmates were officially thrown out by a judge Thursday morning.

The men [petitioned the court in September](#), seeking to have 1 convictions overturned and set aside. They found out Wednesday that their request [had been granted](#).

Ten of the 15 defendants appeared in court Thursday at the Leighton Criminal Courthouse to have their slates wiped clean.

"I feel like I have the opportunity to do whatever I want to do now. It's like a new life for me. I'm 36 years old. I mean, I can do whatever I want to do right now," said Leonard Gipson, one of the exonerated men.

"Now I have vindication. It's very sad to think that we as a people, and I mean all of us, in the United States, have to go through this type of stuff," said Philip Thomas, another exonerated man.

The 18 overturned convictions, from 2003 to 2008, were tied to ex-Chicago Police Sergeant Ronald Watts, who was accused of manufacturing evidence during investigations. The defendants claimed Watts and his team of officers framed them for drug crimes.

"Everyone knew, pay Watts or go to jail. That's just the way it was going to go. If you're not going to pay him, you're going to jail. Everyone knew what he was doing," Gipson said.

"In these cases, we concluded that unfortunately, the police were not being truthful. We couldn't have confidence in the integrity of their reports and their testimony. So in good conscience, we could not see these convictions stand," said Mark Rotert, director of the Cook County State's Attorney's Office's Conviction Integrity Unit.

"I am just extraordinarily heartened by today. I think it's an extraordinary sign of what's going on in this country and this city," said Joshua Tepfer, the attorney representing the group of exonerated men.

Watts was convicted of extorting money from drug dealers in 2013 and served a federal sentence of 22 months. Observers said the mass exoneration marks a historic day in Cook County.

"I think there is potential that this will emerge, when it comes into full view, as perhaps the biggest scandal in the history of the police department," said

independent journalist Jamie Kalven.

Frank and Alexa Saunders have since moved out of state to try to escape what they called the culture of corruption at the Chicago Police Department.

"I just feel like this can be put behind us now because voice-their voices, our voices are being heard," Alexa Saunders said.

Chicago police spokesman Anthony Guglielmi said Thursday night that six officers and a sergeant will be placed on desk duty pending an investigation into whether they committed any wrongdoing while working under Watts.

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Chicago Police Superintendent Eddie Johnson spoke Thursday about the mass exoneration of 15 men whose convictions were tied to a tainted Chicago police officer.

CPD Superintendent Eddie Johnson said he will not be making a rush to judgement on what should happen with at least seven other officers who were part of Watts's team, but he is also making clear he won't tolerate bad cops.

Johnson faced tough questions during an appearance at the City Club, both because of Watts's behavior and because other officers are still on the street and have never been charged.

"We're taking a very hard look at anybody that was involved in those incidents," Johnson said.

Johnson said the exonerated men's allegations were investigated by an outside agency at the time, but the department will now look at those cases and the other officers involved.

"If they day comes where they are convicted of something, they won't be on the job. But we just can't arbitrarily take the job away from people," he said.

He also said the department is looking at the possibility of taking the officers off the streets during the investigations.

"Well, we're looking at it very, very hard and once I get enough information, then that's maybe what happens," Johnson said.

During his speech to the City Club, Johnson talked about the importance of police integrity in the communities they serve, especially as the department is making reforms and community policing key elements in reducing violence.

"As part of that commitment we will create a team of dedicated people to ensure that reforms are implemented properly the first time and are sustainable in the long term to truly change the way that CPD does business," he said.

But Johnson does not see the exonerations as a setback.

"Things of that nature hurt it, but it doesn't damage it to where we can't repair it," he said.

Mayor Rahm Emanuel introduced Johnson and had a message for police officers.

"We expect the most of you and we'll invest the most in you, and there is going to be zero tolerance for anything deviating from that," Emanuel said.

Tepfer said some of the officers linked to Watts in the wrongful convictions are still on the police force. He alleged those officers are still targeting the defendants today.

"This corruption was covered up by the highest levels of the Chicago Police Department. It was swept under the rug by all sorts of law enforcement

community for a decade or more. This is a code of silence, you've heard that. A thin blue line unlike anything that any of us have ever seen," Tepfer said

Tepfer, who is part of [The Exoneration Project](#), a free legal clinic at the University of Chicago Law School, said there could be more overturned convictions to come.

During Watt's tenure, he and other Chicago police officers were linked about 1,000 arrests that led to about 500 convictions. To date, 26 convictions have been overturned. Tepfer said that means there are still more than 450 cases for possible review.

State's attorney spokesman Robert Foley said conviction integrity unit is looking into dozens of other cases and identified a pattern suggesting "corrupt activity" involving Watts and "members of his crew."

All 15 defendants completed their sentences. That's time they will never get back.

Tepfer said his clients are exploring the option of seeking reparations for time served, but they were just enjoying the moment Thursday.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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Men who allege they were framed by crooked Chicago cop get mass exoneration



Aamer Madhani

USA TODAY

Published 2:58 p.m. ET Nov. 16, 2017 | Updated 10:41 p.m. ET Nov. 16, 2017

CHICAGO — A judge on Thursday threw out convictions against 15 men who allege they were framed by a corrupt former Chicago Police sergeant and his underlings who demanded protection payoffs from residents and drug dealers in a city housing project.

Judge LeRoy Martin Jr. agreed to dismiss the charges after Cook County prosecutors confirmed at a brief hearing that they no longer had faith in the credibility of convictions brought against the men who were arrested on various drug charges from 2003 to 2008 by the rogue cop Ronald Watts and officers under his charge.

“In good conscience we could not see these convictions stand,” said Mark Rotert, who heads the Cook County State's Attorney's conviction integrity unit.

The mass exoneration is the latest mark on the Chicago Police Department, which has come under fire in the city's black and Latino communities for unnecessarily using deadly force, police brutality and mistreatment of minorities.

The U.S. Justice Department issued a scathing report in the final days of the Obama administration about the Chicago Police Department finding that the city's police force is beset by widespread racial bias, poor training and feckless oversight of officers accused of misconduct.

Following the dismissal of charges against the 15 men on Thursday, Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Police Superintendent Eddie Johnson said in a joint statement that they had “zero

tolerance for abuse, misconduct or any unlawful actions” by law enforcement. More convictions could potentially be overturned as the integrity unit says it will review any credible complaints brought by people convicted of crimes that were investigated by Watts.

“The actions of Ronald Watts must be condemned by all of us, and we will continue our work to ensure the abuses of the past are never repeated in the future,” Emanuel and Johnson said in the statement.

The dismissals come two months after lawyers for the 15 men filed a petition on their behalf asking that their drug convictions be overturned because they had been framed by Watts.

Watts and another officer, Kallat Mohammed, pleaded guilty on federal charges in 2013 for stealing money from a drug courier who'd been working as an FBI informant. Watts received a 22-month sentence and Mohammed was sentenced to 18-months in federal prison for the shakedowns.

But the petitioners said Watts and his officers had terrorized residents of the Ida B. Wells public housing complex, a massive complex on the city's South Side that is now shuttered, for years before they were caught by federal agents.

The petitioners also allege that several other officers, beyond Mohammed, took part in the scheme to plant drugs on innocent residents and drug dealers who refused to pay protection money. Several hours after the convictions were overturned, police department spokesman Frank Giancamilli confirmed that six officers and one sergeant who worked under Watts on the overturned cases, and are still work for the police department, were placed on desk duty pending an internal review of the cases.

Rotert said after reviewing the cases prosecutors concluded that the police officers were “not being truthful” and lost confidence in the arresting officers' reports and testimony.

Rotert declined to speak about specific evidence that led State's Attorney Kim Foxx to move to ask the courts to drop the charges. But he noted that his unit saw a troubling trend of defendants complaining early during their prosecution that drugs had been planted on them by Watts and his officers.

The 15 men, who had 18 convictions connected to Watts and his officers, join five others whose drug-related convictions connected to the officers that were previously overthrown. All the men were African-American and received sentences ranging from probation to nine years in prison.

Joshua Tepfer, the lead attorney representing the 15 men in the case, said police ignored complaints by residents about Watts and his officers.

One petitioner who had his conviction overturned, Leonard Gipson, 36, alleged that it was common knowledge in Ida B. Wells housing complex that Watts demanded payments from drug dealers and would plant drugs on men in the project — some who say they were not dealers — if they refused to pay him bribes.

He filed a complaint with the police department after he was arrested in 2003 and says Watts planted drugs on him. Four months later with charges still pending in the first arrest, he said Watts arrested him and planted drugs on him once again.

“Everybody knew if you’re not going to pay Watts, you were going to jail,” Gipson said.

In fact, Watts had been on the FBI’s radar for several years before he was finally arrested along with a junior officer Kallat Mohammed in 2012 after they were caught shaking down an FBI informant.

A September 2004 FBI report included portions of an interview by federal agents with an individual who alleged “Watts gets IBW (Ida B. Wells) drug dealers to pay him ‘to work’ (sell drugs) in the housing project. If the payments are made to Watts, he will in turn allow the drug dealers to continue to sell drugs.” The interview surfaced as a result of 2014 federal lawsuit filed by a man who alleged he had been framed by Watts, according to court filings.

Tepfer says Watts and his crew made about 500 arrests from 2003 to 2008 that led to convictions. He said that he and his team are currently vetting as many as two dozen additional convictions of people who said they had drugs planted on them by Watts or his officers for refusing to pay them off.

“These convictions stick with you,” Tepfer said. “The time that you served you can’t get back. It affects your ability to get jobs, housing, to get public aid...These were poor, African-American impoverished communities in public housing that had no ability to trust law enforcement to help.”

Philip Thomas, 58, one of the petitioners who had his conviction overturned, said the anger still lingers over the more than six years he spent in prison on convictions that he says were the result of Watts and his officers planting drugs on him.

“The better years of my life were spent running from them and then in the penitentiary,” Thomas said.

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CRIMINAL JUSTICE

20 more convictions linked to disgraced ex-CPD sergeant are tossed

By Megan Crepeau

Chicago Tribune • Published: Feb 01, 2022 at 12:46 pm



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Cook County prosecutors agreed to the dismissal of 20 convictions connected to notorious ex-Chicago police Sgt. Ronald Watts and his crew, and indicated they would oppose efforts to throw out another 15 cases, attorneys said in court Tuesday.

At future court dates this month, prosecutors will agree that at least 30 more Watts-related convictions should be vacated, Cook County State's Attorney Kim Foxx told reporters Tuesday.

More than 130 such convictions have been dismissed in recent years, according to the Cook County state's attorney's office. Foxx said the effort was crucial to restoring trust so that citizens are comfortable cooperating with police and prosecutors.

"This is integral to public safety, I cannot say it enough," she said. "We ask every day for members of the community to step up and work with us ... if they don't believe the system is fair and just and in fact that the system is designed to hurt them, they won't help us, and we need them."

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Judge Erica Reddick, acting presiding judge of the Criminal Division, formally vacated 20 convictions for 19 people at the end of a lengthy hearing Tuesday. The Watts era was “clearly shown to be a blight on the criminal justice system,” she said from the bench.

Prosecutors did not agree Tuesday to the request that 15 other convictions should be tossed out. Those cases may be headed for further hearings at which a judge will decide whether the convictions should stand.



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Watts and his crew of tactical officers have been accused of orchestrating a lengthy reign of terror at the now-razed Ida B. Wells public housing complex on the South Side, systematically forcing residents and drug dealers alike to pay a “protection” tax and putting bogus cases on those who refused to do so.

When Watts was finally caught, in 2012, it was on relatively minor federal charges of shaking down a drug courier who turned out to be an FBI agent. Watts and Officer Kallatt Mohammed both pleaded guilty, and Watts received 22 months in prison. He was released in 2015.



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By [Angelino's Coffee](#)

Tuesday’s hearing was the latest in a string of “mass exonerations” related to Watts and his crew, the first of which made headlines in 2017 as the county’s first en-masse dismissal.

Prosecutors are committed to reviewing each case separately, rather than simply throwing out all cases with any connection to the crew, Foxx told reporters.

“We have to talk about them on an individual basis, it depends on who was working on the cases, the time period

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Attorneys for Watts' accusers, however, told reporters they cannot see any differences between the cases that prosecutors have chosen to dismiss and maintain.

"Each one of these people has presented the same evidence of innocence," said Joel Flaxman, who represents several of the people whose cases were heard Tuesday. "... We're going to be back in court on each one of the cases, and I hope that we'll be able to convince the state's attorney. Failing that, we will have hearings where we convince a judge of the innocence of all our clients."

Tuesday's hearing was the first of three scheduled court dates at which prosecutors will announce whether they will fight to keep dozens of Watts-related convictions intact. Further proceedings are scheduled for later this month.

The hearings are a response to an expansive joint effort last summer by attorneys for 88 people with Watts-related convictions, who filed petitions en masse asking that those cases be thrown out.

It was a bold move, seemingly intended to force Cook County prosecutors to announce a decision on the cases after prosecutors' ongoing review of such convictions had, in the view of some Watts accusers' attorneys, stalled out.

Prosecutors said in November they would not oppose the dismissal of five of those cases.

Since there were still dozens of cases from last summer's petition that had not yet been resolved, Reddick agreed to split the list of cases into three parts, so as not to overburden the schedule.

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18 men framed by 'corrupt' Chicago police sergeant have convictions overturned

This brings the total number of overturned cases involving the sergeant to 42.

By [Meghan Keneally](#)

September 24, 2018, 4:06 PM



Illinois apologizes to wrongfully convicted persons

"We must have a criminal justice system that has integrity and credibility" said Kim Foxx, the State's Attorney for Cook County, Ill.

The work of a "corrupt" police sergeant is still being undone in Chicago as 18 more wrongful convictions tied to his cases were overturned.

With the 18 vacated convictions announced today, that brings to 42 the total number of cases overturned that involved Sgt. Ronald Watts. All of the cases vacated today were connected connected to convictions following narcotics arrests.

"I'm just happy that, you know, I'm able to move forward with my life," said Martez Wise, who spent four years in jail for a narcotics conviction after an arrest involving Watts.

"It's been four years out of my life that I have to be away from my family, kids. I mean, I'm not the only one that had to suffer. I mean, they had to suffer too because I had to be away from them," Wise said at a news conference today.

Cook County State's Attorney Kim Foxx said her office wants all convictions in the area to be "based on fairness and the utmost integrity."

"We could not stand behind of the integrity of these convictions because of the behavior of Sgt. Watts and his crew," Foxx said. "What we know what was happening with Sgt. Watts and the way he ran his operation was that there were many men and women who fell victim to his corrupt ways."



Kim Foxx, candidate for Cook County State's Attorney, arrives for lunch on Tuesday, Nov. 8, 2016 at Manny's Cafeteria and Delicatessen in Chicago. Zbigniew Bzdak/Chicago Tribune/TNS via Getty Images, FILE

Watts was convicted in 2012 and sentenced to 22 months in prison after he was caught stealing money from an FBI informant in a sting, [ABC affiliate WLS reported](#) in 2016, when 15 others had Watts-related convictions overturned.

"We must have a criminal justice system that has integrity and credibility," Foxx said. "That means that we have to admit when things have gone wrong and actively work to fix it."

The individuals from the latest batch of overturned convictions were given sentences ranging from probation to four years in prison.

Both Wise and Mister Pearson, one of the 17 others whose convictions were vacated, said Watts or his team planted drugs on them at the time of their arrests.

"I prayed on this day every day ... knowing that one day eventually this day would come," Wise said. "I'm just grateful."



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18 Exonerated in Chicago's Second Mass Exoneration

09.24.18 | By Innocence Staff



Today, Cook County Chief Judge Leroy Martin dismissed the convictions of 18 people alleged to have been framed by former Chicago police Sergeant Ronald Watts and his

tactical unit. Today's mass exoneration, which involves drug cases brought between 2003 and 2008, brings the total number of Watts-related exonerations to 42.

Today's decision arrives one year after the convictions of 15 men, who Watts and his team similarly framed, were overturned—marking the first mass exoneration in Cook County history. The men accused Watts of extorting, framing, threatening and harassing them, along with other residents of the Ida B. Wells housing project.

Related: [Lawsuit Claims Chicago Police Sergeant Framed 15 Men for Drug Crimes](#)

"We continue to hear that many of these arrests were purely conjured," said Mark Rotert, the Chief of the State's Attorney's Conviction Integrity Unit. "They were basically arresting people and framing them or were claiming that they were involved in drug offenses that either didn't occur or didn't occur the way that those police officers said."

Cook County State's Attorney Kim Foxx filed a motion to overturn the latest convictions as part of a review of cases handled by Watts' team. The review, conducted by Foxx's Conviction Integrity Unit, has already resulted in 24 exonerations. Dozens of other cases tied to Watts remain under review.

"We could not stand behind the integrity of these cases because of the behavior of Mr. Watts," Foxx told [reporters](#) after today's hearing. "When things have gone wrong, we have to actively work to fix them."

In 2012, Watts and ex-officer Kallatt Mohammed were federally indicted after attempting to rob someone they believed was a drug courier but was actually an FBI informant. Watts pled guilty and was sentenced to 22 months in prison.

Related: [Charges Dismissed Against Exoneration Project Client Convicted Due to Police Misconduct](#)

Less than one year ago, 15 officers who worked under Watts were demoted to desk duty. The Cook County State's Attorney's office said they would no longer use the testimony of any officers linked to Watts.

After leaving the courthouse, Joshua Tepfer, an [Exoneration Project](#) attorney who represents 12 men exonerated earlier today, told [reporters](#), "We're extraordinarily pleased. This type of thing doesn't happen across the country very often...This crew of officers was

just dirty and they were really dirty for a long time. These are just made-up cases. The victims are these men."

Read the full story [here](#).

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Susan marie Walsh
September 30, 2018 at 5:57 pm | [Reply](#)

Amazing story. State police chief Mike Robinson did the same thing in Saginaw framing dozens of people in order to get promotions. I wrote a book about it. Lots of hard evidence.
Susan Marie Walsh

'A Stain on the City': 63 People's Convictions Tossed in Chicago Police Scandal

By Christine Hauser

Feb. 13, 2019

In 2012, a Chicago police sergeant and an officer were arrested in an undercover operation for stealing \$5,200 from a person carrying what they thought was cash for drug dealers. The officers eventually entered plea deals, but the arrests led to scrutiny of the tactics they and their team had used while making drug arrests at the Ida B. Wells housing complex on Chicago's South Side for years.

This week, 14 men with drug convictions related to those cases were exonerated — four of them on Wednesday and 10 on Monday. With those exonerations, 63 men and women have had their cases vacated because of the involvement of Sgt. Ronald Watts and Officer Kallatt Mohammed, lawyers for the 14 men said.

"It is a stain on the city," said Joshua Tepfer, a lawyer with the University of Chicago Law School's Exoneration Project, which has represented 47 of the 63 people exonerated.

"One thing that goes without saying is the reason they were covered up is they were viewed as a disposable people who live in the housing projects," he said. "Nobody cared. Nobody believed them."

Robert Foley, a spokesman for the Cook County state's attorney, said on Tuesday in an email that the State's Attorney's Office would continue to review the matters on a case-by-case basis.

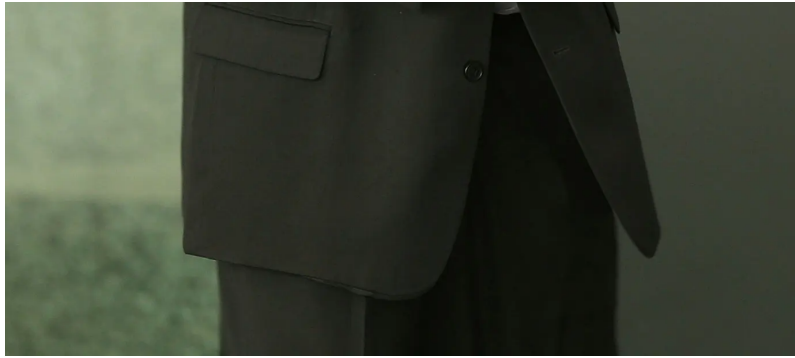
The arrests of Sergeant Watts and Officer Mohammed came after F.B.I. and Chicago Police Department investigators recruited an informant to tell the two law enforcement officers that the informant was carrying the \$5,200 for a drug trafficker, a statement from the United States attorney for the Northern District of Illinois said at the time of their arrest in 2012.

The two officers took the money, and then paid the informant \$400 "for allowing them to steal the drug proceeds" in 2011, the statement said. "Who always takes care of you?" Sergeant Watts told the informant, according to the statement.

After their arrests, Sergeant Watts and Officer Mohammed were charged with theft of government funds. Officer Mohammed entered a plea agreement in 2012 and was sentenced to 18 months, and Sergeant Watts pleaded guilty in 2013 and was sentenced to 22 months, according to Joseph Fitzpatrick, an assistant United States attorney for the Northern District.

A lawyer for former Sergeant Watts and representatives for the Civilian Office of Police Accountability were not immediately available for comment on Wednesday; the Chicago Police Department and a lawyer for former Officer Mohammed declined to comment.





Ronald Watts leaving court after being sentenced to 22 months of prison in 2013. Phil Velasquez/Chicago Tribune, via Associated Press

But people who had been arrested by Sergeant Watts and Officer Mohammed took note. They petitioned to vacate the convictions that had resulted from Sergeant Watts and his team's arrests years before.

"A lot of those convictions then fell by the wayside," said James A. Graham, a lawyer who represented Officer Mohammed at the time he took the plea deal.

The Exoneration Project and another Chicago-area lawyer, Joel Flaxman, worked to vet cases of convicted men and women who said they were innocent of the charges imposed on them by members of the team led by Sergeant Watts and who had filed misconduct complaints against the officers.

Once vetted, their cases are turned over to Cook County State's Attorney's Office. In November 2017, the State's Attorney's Office said it filed the first of its motions to vacate the convictions of people based on concerns regarding allegations of misconduct of the arresting officers, including Sergeant Watts. In subsequent statements on exonerations, Kimberly M. Foxx, the state's attorney, linked additional exonerations to "the misconduct" of the officers.

"We found a pattern of misconduct by Watts and other officers in these cases, which caused our office to lose confidence in the initial arrests and validity of these convictions," Ms. Foxx said last year. "May the defendants, who we now believe were victims, find a path forward in healing and justice."

Leonard Gipson, whose convictions were among the first vacated in 2017, said in an interview on Wednesday that he had spent time incarcerated in 2003 and in 2007 after being charged with delivering crack and heroin.

"The biggest impact was it took a lot of time away from my kids growing up," he said, speaking of his children, who are now 18 and 16. "I missed out on so much time in their life. And I don't think it is really possible to make up that time."

On Monday and Wednesday, Judge LeRoy K. Martin Jr. of Cook County, during a hearing in Chicago, granted further motions and vacated the convictions of the 10 men. Two of the four were in court on Wednesday, said Mr. Flaxman, who represented the four in court.

"The floodgates opened of people coming out of the woodwork and saying, 'Hey, it happened to us,'" Mr. Flaxman said.

It is not clear how many more convictions will be challenged. Some people sought exonerations after their sentences had been served, while others are still in prison, Mr. Tepfer said. About 15 police officers who had worked on Sergeant Watts's team were put on desk duty, but the Chicago Police Department declined to comment on Wednesday.

"There is a ton to unpack," he said. "We are going to be doing this for years."

(<https://www.wttw.com/>)

CRIME & LAW (/CRIME-LAW)

6 More Men Have Convictions Tossed in Cases Tied to Ex-Chicago Police Sergeant

Matt Masterson (</stories-by-author/Matt Masterson>) | December 15, 2020 11:43 am



(Thomas Hawk / Flickr)

On Christmas Eve in 2004, Jermaine Morris was on his way to pick up his girlfriend at the Ida B. Wells housing project in Bronzeville when he was allegedly grabbed, robbed and falsely arrested by then-Chicago police Sgt. Ronald Watts and members of his tactical team.

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Instead of celebrating the holidays, Morris ended up with a one year prison sentence on drug charges fabricated by Watts. On Tuesday morning, Morris appeared in court again, this time as one of six men who had convictions tied to the disgraced former sergeant tossed out.

During a hearing Tuesday, a Cook County judge approved motions brought by the State's Attorney's office to vacate wrongful convictions against Antwan Bradley, David Holmes, Shaun James, Derrick Mapp, Bryant Patrick and Morris.

In all, 80 men and women, who were sentenced to 256 years in prison across more than 100 total Watts-related cases, have had their convictions dismissed over the past three years (<https://news.wttw.com/2017/11/16/15-men-cleared-first-ever-mass-exoneration-cook-county>), according to The Exoneration Project (<https://www.exonerationproject.org/>). But those dismissals almost always came well after those sentences had been served.

"The seeds of distrust for our criminal justice system run deeply in communities most impacted by violence because of people in power like Sergeant Watts and his cronies who targeted and criminally preyed on these communities, leaving these neighborhoods feeling like their voice didn't matter," Cook County State's Attorney Kim Foxx said in a statement.

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committed to thoroughly & promptly correct it. Today's actions on reversing six convictions tied to the corrupt Sgt. Watts are another step to rebuilding trust in our justice system.<https://t.co/waEsOZNcRb>
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— State's Attorney Kim Foxx (@SAKimFoxx) December 15, 2020
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Watts, Officer Kallatt Mohammed and others on their CPD tactical team have been accused of routinely extorting residents and guests at the Ida B. Wells housing project for more than a decade in the early 2000s. If they didn't pay up, the cops would then allegedly plant felony-level drug amounts on them and lie about it under oath.

In 2012, Watts and Mohammed were federally indicted and later pled guilty to taking a bribe from an informant. Law enforcement documents have since revealed that Watts and members of his team were running a "protection racket" for more than a decade, planting evidence and fabricating charges against South Side residents while facilitating their own drug and gun trade.

Joshua Tepfer, an attorney with The Exoneration Project who has represented defendants in dozens of these cases include those appearing Tuesday, outlined his clients' allegations against Watts and his team during the hearing.

Mapp said he was merely standing in a hallway at the housing project in April 2006 when he was allegedly detained, severely beaten and arrested by Watts and others. Tepfer said his client had to be admitted to Stroger Hospital with a punctured lung.

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Two months later in May, Holmes was allegedly pulled from his car by Watts, who had been shaking him down for months, promising to put a drug case on him if he didn't pay up. Holmes ended up being arrested and sentenced to four years in prison.

While Foxx's office brought the motions to vacate these cases, it did so because prosecutors no longer have confidence in the evidence brought by Watts, Mohammed and others. But the allegations outlined by Tepfer were "not necessarily the findings of the State's Attorney's Office," an assistant state's attorney said in court Tuesday.

Regardless, Foxx said it's "always the right time to do the right thing" and "never too late to deliver justice" to the victims in these cases.

"Whether an injustice occurred two decades ago or two months ago, my office's Conviction Integrity Unit will do our due diligence to thoroughly and promptly correct it," she said in a statement. "Today's actions are another step in acknowledging the harm caused to the community and rebuilding the public's trust in the criminal justice system."

Contact Matt Masterson: @ByMattMasterson (<https://twitter.com/ByMattMasterson>) / mmasterson@wttw.com (<mailto:mmasterson@wttw.com>) / (773) 509-5431

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RONALD WATTS

Chicago Police Scandal Continues As More Cases Thrown Out

Nine more individuals were exonerated Friday, in a case stemming from corruption at the former Ida B. Wells Housing Project. So far, over a hundred cases have been dismissed.

By **Phil Rogers** • Published February 19, 2021 • Updated on February 19, 2021 at 7:19 pm



Nine more overturned convictions have been linked to a disgraced Chicago Police Department sergeant. In all, 109 cases have been vacated. NBC 5 Investigates' Phil Rogers reports.

The largest scandal in the Chicago Police Department's history continued to grow Friday, as prosecutors asked a judge to throw out the convictions of nine individuals who said they were framed by a rogue sergeant and the tactical team under his command.

"This is an ongoing and active investigation," Cook County Assistant State's Attorney Nancy Adduci told the judge. "However, as to these nine cases before you, the people have lost confidence in some of the evidence that is the

foundation of these convictions."

The nine individuals in question, Mark Giles, Bryant Patrick, Jermaine Morris, Lloyd Newman, Tyrone Herron, Eveless Harris, Trinere Johnson and Catrina Bonner, had all been arrested by officers working with disgraced Sgt. Ronald Watts. The sergeant and his tactical team worked for years at the former Ida B. Wells housing project. And over a hundred of the cases they developed have now been thrown out, as prosecutors conceded they were probably fabricated by the arresting officers.

Only Watts and one of his officers, Kallat Mohammed, were ever charged in the scandal.

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"There's a whole team of officers who worked with them," said attorney Joshua Tepfer, who represents scores of men and women who have seen their cases dismissed. "Watts and his team invented a drug crime that didn't happen."

More than a dozen other officers were pulled from the street and assigned to desk duty as they were investigated. But over three years later, the Civilian Office of Police Accountability has yet to rule on those cases.

"Watts went to prison for 22 months, Mohammed for 18 months," Tepfer noted. "No one else has been charged, no one else has lost their job, no one else has been disciplined."

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The allegations were so egregious that the State's Attorney's office took the unusual step of sending a so-called "do not call" letter to CPD, saying that at least 10 of the officers would never be allowed to testify again in a criminal proceeding, due to concerns about their credibility.

"We heard over three years ago that officers were being placed on desk duty and investigations were beginning, and that's the last we heard," said attorney Joel Flaxman, who also represents dozens of exonerees. "But they are

accused in just about every case that has been thrown out."

A COPA spokesman did not immediately respond to a request for comment. In a statement, State's Attorney Kim Foxx said her office is continuing to review cases associated with Watts and his men.

"There's a lingering pit in my stomach due to the real sorrow that for so long, Sergeant Watts and his crew were able to terrorize and criminalize a community," Foxx said. "Vacating the convictions of these nine people today who were targeted by Watts provides just a fraction of relief for those who spent time in prison, away from their families."

Tepfer says he has at least 70 more cases in the pipeline, and expressed frustration that the exoneration efforts are not moving more quickly. And he said he found the mayor's pronouncements about improving the lives of Black citizens hollow in light of the Watts scandal.

"Mayor Lightfoot has done absolutely nothing but continue to pay these officers' salaries and finance their defense in the civil lawsuits that have happened because of this," Tepfer said. "The City of Chicago should be absolutely ashamed of themselves."

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CHICAGO POLICE DEPARTMENT

9 more convictions from disgraced Chicago Police Sgt. Ronald Watts vacated



By [Mark Rivera](#) 

Sunday, July 25, 2021



WLS

CHICAGO (WLS) -- Nine more convictions connected to disgraced former Chicago Police Sergeant Ronald Watts were thrown out at the request of Cook County State's Attorney Kim Foxx Friday.

Tinere Johnson was two months pregnant when she said Watts set her up on drug charges during his reign of terror.

Johnson said she didn't know what to do when Watts and his team rounded her up on drugs charges at the Ida B Wells Homes in March 2008.

"I'm two, three months pregnant with my first child, so I was really scared and really mad and shocked that these people really did that to me," Johnson said.

Pregnant and frightened, Johnson said she pleaded guilty to avoid a prison sentence and was released from the county jail on probation. For more than a decade, that guilty plea hung over her.

"It messed up job opportunities, it messes up housing. A lot of people don't want to deal with people with drug backgrounds," Johnson said.

Now, that's all changed. A judge honored the request from the Cook County State's Attorney Conviction Integrity Unit to vacate Johnson's conviction along with eight other convictions connected to Watts. The total Watts-related convictions reversed so far is 109, according to the state's attorney.

"It's not even just the time he took from these men and these women and their community, but it's the long term harm he's done to our justice system when people have lost faith, when police officers come to hurt and not heal," Foxx said.

She added a warning to those who abuse their authority.

"We will not tolerate at the Cook County State's Attorney's office convictions that were ill gotten by corrupt law enforcement. You won't find a home here," Foxx said.

Now that Johnson's conviction has been vacated, she said she is seeking a certificate of innocence so she can put this 13 year violation behind her.

"A burden is off my shoulder. I feel so much better with my life now," she said.

Her attorney Joel Flaxman said the certificate should take a month or so to obtain.

"Some measure of justice has finally been done for her and the other people who had their convictions vacated," Flaxman said.

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Criminal Justice

State's Attorney Kim Foxx is doubling down on dozens of convictions tied to a corrupt ex-cop

By [Chip Mitchell](#)

Mar 24, 2022, 6:01am CT



Former Chicago Police Sgt. Ronald Watts leaves the Dirksen Federal Building in 2013 after receiving a 22-month sentence for his role in an FBI undercover sting. In court filings this week, Foxx's office argued people who are challenging 37 Watts-tied convictions blew a two-year deadline for filing their claims. The office would not specify how those cases differ from 169 Watts-linked convictions that prosecutors supported throwing out. Kevin Tanaka / Sun-Times Media

Former Chicago Police Sgt. Ronald Watts leaves the Dirksen Federal Building in 2013 after receiving a 22-month sentence for his role in an FBI undercover sting. In court filings this week, Foxx's office argued people who are challenging 37 Watts-tied convictions blew a two-year deadline for filing their claims. The office would not specify how those cases differ from 169 Watts-linked convictions that prosecutors supported throwing out. Kevin Tanaka / Sun-Times Media

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State's Attorney Kim Foxx is doubling down on dozens of convictions tied to a corrupt ex-cop

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